

Old, Gray, and Proud of It: bucking the trend towards age-denial

By Marian Van Eyk McCain

Marian, a psychologist and author of several books on women and aging recalls a time, thirty years ago, when she felt scared about getting old. She recounts how her attitude changed over time, first to acceptance and then to a discovery of the joys and benefits of being an 'elderwoman.' Now, fit and happy at 73 years old and a radical champion of 'natural aging', she is urging the baby boom generation to ignore the siren-call of the youth-culture and the cynical blandishments of consumerism and, instead of trying desperately to stop the clock with cosmetic surgery and Botox, to let themselves age naturally and wear their smart, gray hair with pride.

I came back from town with my new reading glasses and put them on the table in their plastic case. "My first pair," I said to my partner. "I'm getting old, aren't I?"

"Don't worry about it" he replied. "You still look young to me. Anyway it's no good being upset about getting old. We all get old eventually." He gave me a big bear hug. "I know," I sniffed, burying my nose in his warm shoulder. "But it's just that I don't want to get old while I'm still young." That was undoubtedly one of the most nonsensical statements I ever made (and I still get teased about it, thirty years later) but he knew what I meant.

I bought a pretty chain for that first pair of specs and adjusted to my new self-image. After all, some of my work colleagues had them too. We joked about them, just as we joked about our failing memories and our 'middle-age spread.' Just as, a few years later, we would joke about our hot flashes (the wonderful term 'power surges' had not been invented back then. Or if it had, I hadn't yet heard it.)

The problem with distance vision crept up on me so slowly that I was only vaguely aware of it - until the day I missed a bus stop through my inability to read a street sign. This time, the optician prescribed variable focus lenses.

The day I collected them, I went home on the bus. Glancing at people's reflections in the bus window, I noticed an elderly woman with gray hair and spectacles and quite a few wrinkles. My vision sharpened with the new lenses, I stared at her, only to recoil in horror when I realized who she was. Me.

I realized something else in that split second, too. Which was that like so many other women in our culture, I'd acquired the 'eek!freak!squeak!' reaction to aging. Like those early electric wall clocks whose big hand used to lurch judderingly forward every sixty seconds, we often become aware of our own aging process in separate, jerky moments, rather than feeling it as a smooth, continuous movement through time. The first gray hair; the first pair of glasses; the first discovery of age spots or wrinkles.

Suddenly, I saw two visions in my mind at once, as on a split screen, like watching two different movies at the same time. The movie on the left featured me as a young

teenager, surrounded by my friends, as we huddled around the school radiators, talking about periods and brassieres and boys and wishing we could outgrow our acne, grow bigger breasts, grow up, leave school, drink alcohol legally, stay out all night, be movie stars.....

The movie on the right was replaying all those rueful comments about reading glasses and distance glasses, failing memories, hot flashes and the backwards yearning for a flat tummy and perky breasts.

Somewhere, I thought, there must a point where those two movies meet in the middle. But what is it? Try as I would, I couldn't remember the moment when it felt absolutely perfect to be exactly the age I was. How dumb is *that*?

It dawned on me, then, that part of the spiritual task of accepting ourselves as we are is to accept ourselves as the *age* we are. Wishing we were younger – or older – is not only ridiculous, since there's nothing we can do to change our age, it's also a total waste of time. The past is gone, the future hasn't happened and the only true reality is the present moment. Living fully in each moment is, as all the sages from every wisdom tradition, including Christianity, agree, the only key to happiness and contentment.

Now, as the baby boomers start turning sixty, I notice a lot of 'eek!freak!squeak!' going on. A lot of denial, too. Plug the phrase 'anti-aging' into Google and you get an unbelievable **2,670,000** entries. Cosmetic surgery, Botox, thousands of dollars being spent every day by women trying to look younger than they are, while half the world's children starve. What's wrong with this picture?

But I must try not to judge my sisters harshly. I mustn't forget how I felt, that day I saw myself in the bus window. Since we live in a culture that is fixated on youth, all of us, to some degree, have absorbed the (erroneous) message that young is beautiful and old is ugly, even though, deep down, we know that the only true beauty comes from within.

I believe instead of pandering to it we owe it to ourselves and to our daughters and granddaughters to change this stupid, outdated conditioning. We owe it to ourselves to strip away the shallow standards of 'beauty' that the fashion industry, the cosmetics industry and most of all the advertising industry all feed on. We're being exploited, and it is time we stood up and said a huge "NO!" The most radical thing we can do – and the most beneficial – is to dare to be ourselves, as we are, old, gray and proud of it.

I earned every one of these wrinkles I see in the mirror. I earned every one of those age spots on my skin and I earned my gray hair. It is starting to turn white now. I love it. It actually suits me better than brown ever did and the whiter it gets, the better I look in my favorite black dress. And I like wearing glasses. They really suit me – and they disguise the fact that I really have no eyebrows worth speaking of.

At 73, I'm fit and trim, happy and full of vitality. I love being old. I'm having the time of my life. So are lots of the other, 'natural' elderwomen I know, in their sixties, seventies, eighties, nineties, even beyond. We are being ourselves. And we are

beautiful, each in our own way, just the way we are, wrinkles, white hair, glasses and all.

Marian Van Eyk McCain is the author of *Transformation through Menopause* (Bergin & Garvey 1991), written for women who seek a deep understanding of their menopause process, *ELDERWOMAN: Reap the wisdom, feel the power, embrace the joy* (Findhorn Press, 2002), an inspirational 'trail guide' for the third age journey, and *The Lilypad List: 7 steps to the simple life* (Findhorn Press, 2004). Visit her website at <http://www.elderwoman.org>

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