

I Am Old

by Lee Lipp

Shall I start off right away declaring that I AM OLD, and open myself up to comments like, “You’re only as old as you feel,” or “Age is relative, you know,” or “But you’re still so attractive, my dear”? Maybe if I don’t write these words, you won’t notice that I am old. If I tell you the “number” of my years, I’ll be exposing something shameful that could damage me.

I feel caught in our cultural myth that aging is a failure, that if I only did it right I could avoid old age, even avoid death. What a peculiar notion! Do I believe deep down that aging is optional? That it’s a disease that can be cured, if I only do it right?

How easy it is for me to succumb to our cultural imperative to look and act youthful by any means necessary. The person who cuts my hair says, “Oh, your new hairdo makes you look soooo young.” Or my new friend says, “I’d never guess your age—you look so good.”

“What kind of nonsense is this?” I ask myself as I plunk down cash for an expensive new face cream that promises to delay wrinkles. I notice that the years push me more and more out of the sex appeal arena. Do men grapple with this too? We have some ideas that as we age we are no longer sexy, vital, juicy.

Sometimes when I walk into a room I feel as if I’m invisible, or, even worse, an outcast. We co-create a myth that older people are fundamentally different than younger people, and that their aging is a personal failure. How can we talk to each other about getting old, when so many of us are in denial or shame about it?

Fifteen years ago, working as a psychotherapist, I offered a workshop for “The Aging Woman.” No one signed up. In the last year, two teachers at Green Gulch offered a day for “Old Coots and Crones,” and canceled it when only five people signed up. Can’t we who speak of no birth and no death, no beginning and no end, also speak of the relative time in between?

I only know my intention to receive this gift of age as a pointer towards clarity and freedom. I vow to see old age as an advisor on how to take care of life as it is, in this wrinkly, lumpy, creaky, and cranky body. I vow to be curious and present as well to the joy still kicking in me. Perhaps these vows will dismantle the shame I feel with this exposure. With the intention to love aging, all of it, I call on kindness, respect, and patience, from myself and from you. And so in front of all of you I declare that “I AM OLD.” v

Lee Lipp lives and works at San Francisco Zen Center.