

## **FOCUSING AND AGING: Accompanying a Woman's Aging Journey**

*Patricia Manessy, NHC*

---

I am 59 years old. This year my body began feeling things it never had before. A little something in the knees, a sciatic feeling in the left hip that my chiropractor doesn't seem to be able to 'fix', a little more tired more often, a little more frightened in certain situations, and a painful emptiness around my invisibility as a woman.

There is a wanting to believe that I will age gracefully and that I will model all those wonderful ideals we are currently promoting for the aging process, but somewhere I am going down kicking and screaming.

I have been Focusing on my issues for 22 years and know something about my inner emotional landscape, but being with the physical degenerative process requires a new and kinder attention. The purpose of this paper is to continue the exploration of the inner relationship as it pertains to the bodily felt experiences of aging.

When the idea of sharing my journey emerged, I felt an excitement. I needn't be alone in all of this. Then, nothing happened. Sitting with all of this brought nothing. That's what this phase of life feels like for me. Nothing. And now I am running out of time. With curiosity, I observe the 'nothing' space, and it feels like depression. Staying with the 'nothing'; letting go of the label; yet, the space within holds no life, no wanting, no believing . . . just a flat line.

In truth, I am struggling with aging. I am struggling with letting go of the external, the outside package that reflected my youthfulness, body tone, soft morning skin, fresh face. I feel like a lesser being. I am offended when an 'elderly' gentleman smiles at me and feel like yelling: What are you looking at? What ARE you looking at? Look away. Don't even think about it. You are old and I am not. Go away.

And then, I'm ashamed for thinking this way about someone else who may also be going through the invisibility journey.

I am offended when a young person offers me their seat on the subway. WHAT? I can stand, thank you very much! A friend of mine was outraged when she went into a 'Screaming Eagle' store (you know, everything for the Harley Davidson fan) and was asked by a tattooed young man if she was looking for something for her daughter. Ummmm, NO! Actually I'm looking to buy a leather jacket for myself!

When did all of this happen? And why does it happen? Can I not still be seen as an ordinary human being who has all the wants and desires of a younger person? When do we cross that line from youth to 'old'? What is this line? I'm only 59.

Another of my women friends, who is a little older, 69, was crossing the Canada/US border with her son and daughter-in-law. She was sitting in the front seat with her son, who is about 40. The Customs Officer asked her son what he did for a living, then looked in the

back seat and asked her daughter-in-law the same question, but not for one second did this Officer consider that my friend was a working-woman. She is old and is retired and does nothing. In reality, she is a practicing therapist, a playwright and an actor.

There is a GROWL rumbling within. I want to sit with this outrage. I don't want this article to bring forward boring platitudes about 'aging gracefully'. Yeah, yeah, we know all of that and have been to all the workshops.

What is it? What is the learning? Oh, yes, I know that one too: "radical acceptance of everything" (Cornell, 2005) and accepting the aging process; accepting the non-acceptance of the aging process. Both are true. That is what I want to sit with. Holding both, giving them each space. There is a wanting to be able to just be with my aging, with my aging body, to in fact, yes, "gracefully surrender the things of youth" (Ehrman, 1948). Bah! Humbug! I don't even buy the wanting. A more honest statement would be: Nothing in me, at this moment, is okay with this. And let's have that be okay.

Let's make a space for: *Nothing in me is okay with this whole aging process. Welcome!*

The 'growl' shows itself, allows itself to be seen and observed, and perhaps slightly heard. As soon as there is an inkling of its potential power, it/she recedes. Back to trying to be the nice girl, the one I was raised to be, not making noise, certainly not rocking the boat, not creating a disturbance, and for sure, not showing anger. So, as many women I encounter in my life and in my practice, we suffer from 'depression', the preferred state to growling. (Ah, there is that 'depression' label.) Growling, from time immemorial, has been dangerous for women. This is my ancestral felt knowing. And now, as the time line shows itself, the strength to rebel, the courage needed to stand up and own my power diminishes.

There is something in here about loss of confidence. I create a space to hold this feeling, wishing it to be transitional. The image is like an old tire of mine that had a miniscule puncture and the air was very slowly and almost silently escaping, and inside me something similar is happening: as every year passes, in lieu of increasing and finding its solid foundation, I am punctured and my confidence is slowly escaping my body . . . leaving me more vulnerable and fragile . . . I hold and acknowledge this in its entirety, as it is, right now and at the same time, I hear the 'wish'.

A lost girl shows herself. Hello. She keeps saying: I always thought someone would take care of me. Then, shame emerges around being a woman of today and having such an old thought, such an out-dated belief. Making space for the girl who is repeatedly making that statement with embittered tears, and holding in the other hand, the woman carrying shame. Shame magnifies . . . shame about being a woman, about not being as strong and independent as all our emancipation marches pretended; shame about still being dependent, in emotional turmoil and about being the 'little' woman of my ancestral heritage; shame, now, about an aging, sagging body that no longer pulses wildly; shame about not being financially sound; shame about all the 'incompletes' in my life; shame. And shame permeates cells; shame has a strong handle, an attachment to my very core. I may hold shame, make a space for it, be with it, offer it Presence, and it continues its stronghold. It looks and feels like a web, from the center radiating outward in so many directions, catching me,

holding me prisoner, like glue, with no way out, never, ever letting me go, never giving me permission to taste freedom. As a woman, who is now aging, will I ever be free? I hear it all.

The journey, for the last four months, has been difficult, to put it mildly. I've entered such a dark place around this whole aging thing, realizing that it has really been compounded with the loss of my relationship, two years ago now. The aging issue took a forward leap when the man I believed I would be growing old with ceased to be my partner. Until that moment, I was aging side by side with my man, and I could deal. And suddenly there was aging and aloneness.

With the aloneness came the awareness of my invisibility. Not being seen 'out there' by others, had no importance, was irrelevant, as I was visible right here, in my home, by the person I loved. At least that's what I held to be true. In a flash, everything changed. The impromptu changes came as quite a shock to me, to the fibres of my being. I hadn't realized that I was aging. I hadn't noticed that no one saw me anymore, out there. I wasn't aware of my slow disappearing. Bang! Here it was. All at once. And something in me went into shock. Shock feels just as binding, as immobilizing, as shame. Now, inside me, live two partners, two webs, enmeshed together, enmeshing me. All these lines and circles coming together, knotting me, paralyzing me. I am reminded of the 'Tangle' (Cornell, 2005), and I hold the whole of it, gently reminding myself that "I am the space in which all this can be as it is" (Cornell, 2005).

As these weeks of going within and accompanying all that is my aging self continue to elapse, I look to my mother and her 'oldness'. Ah, poor Mom. She is 88. She is another lost girl; she is needing someone to take care of her. It is her felt truth. My father always took care of her. Today, we call it co-dependency; it was. But that's how it was between them and they loved each other. Yes, co-dependently. Somewhere, perhaps, I absorbed the co-dependent relationship as a model, as THE model. And like her, I know nothing about being alone.

Then, there is also the witnessing of my mother's physical degeneration, certainly more advanced than mine. And there are her fears that make her tremble and her anxiety at the drop of a pin that shortens her breath. I hear it all; I witness it all; I absorb it all. My open sensitivity is a gift; it serves me well in my work, with clients, but it is often without boundaries. I am a chameleon adapting to everyone around me. I have been carrying my mother's inner space.

Coming to this awareness takes me by surprise. Something in me feels that I have no self, so I model others. I allow others to define me; to unload their wounds, their sadness, their depression, their trepidations, their irritability and frustration all over me, and I take it in, making it difficult to sense what belongs to me and, in this case, what belongs to my mother. The enmeshment between my mother's aging process and mine thickens my central web. I imagine lifting, holding all that is my mother and gently putting her at a safe distance from me, allowing more space for the aging me, and yet still cradling her in her lonely, frightening distress. Such is the balancing act for this 'sandwich generation' as I stand somewhere between my old mother and my children and grandchildren.

Another scream is heard within: I am terrified of aging like my mother. No! I don't want to look and sound like my mother at 88. There is 88 like my mother and there is 88 like Betty White, that 'Golden Girl', who just last year made a movie with Sandra Bullock (The Proposal), and who, when interviewed, is alive and vital and coherent and 'all there' and funny, and who in May 2010 hosted, most successfully, Saturday Night Live. Yes! I want to be Betty White Eighty-Eight! I make a huge space for this highest wish for myself.

With friendly curiosity, I gently drop in the question: where does the fear of death sit in all of this? I always prided myself in the fact that I was not afraid of dying, holding somewhere within me this 'not wanting to be here' in the first place. And now, as time (illusion or not) seems to be disappearing, I am clinging to this earth, wanting to plant my two feet solidly for as long as possible. That's on the one hand. On the other hand, I wonder about the advances in science and medicine that seem to keep us here for much longer than expected, or perhaps for much longer than we're supposed to be. The felt truth is: I am less of afraid of death than I am of degenerating into a blubbery older woman; wearing diapers, being spoon-fed, having nobody home inside, and leaving with absolutely no dignity.

There is all of this: the great fear around the gradual degeneration of body and mind, the sadness and emptiness around the aloneness, the fathomless rage around the invisibility, the binding shame around the incapacity to be 'a woman of substance', the seemingly never-ending list of incompletes, and the tick-tock of time running out. I hold all of me in all of this. I make space for the whole of it. I step back and rest into my Greater Self in Presence; I offer all of this kind attention, caring patience; I don't rush the process; I will not push this woman who is *me*. I am, at least, okay with the enmeshed webs and with each thread of emerging awareness.

It would be wonderful to tell you that I am out of the woods, that it is all good now, that I accept my aging process and that I'm about to do that 'aging gracefully' thing. But, no. I am just in this place, and generally I am not happy with it. I am living this journey daily, and I accompany myself in it.

Yes, of course, there are forward moving steps: something in me is slowly, one step at a time, developing a new sense of self. There is a woman in here who is beginning to stand in her own life, on her own two feet; and something in me trusts that as more of my grief heals, the aloneness piece will find its right way of being. I am going to call this Volume I. Perhaps, twenty-five years down the road, when I'll be in my eighties, when the next generation of Focusers revisit the question of Focusing and Aging, I will share how the Betty White in me is doing!

## REFERENCES

- Ehrman, B. P. 1948. *The poems of max ehrman*. New York: Dodge Publishing Company.
- Cornell, A. W. 2005. *The radical acceptance of everything: Living a focusing life*. Berkeley: Calluna Press.
- McGavin, B. & A. W. Cornell. 2008. Treasure maps to the soul. *The Folio. A Journal for Focusing and Experimental Therapy*. 21(1), 41-60.