



The Continuous Creative Act of Holding on and Letting Go: 10 Beautiful Minds on the Art of Growing Older

A great paradox of being alive in this civilization is that we have come to dread and devalue the triumph of having lived, forgetting that to grow old is not a punishment but a privilege — that of having survived [the loneliness of childhood](#), the brash insecurity of youth, [the turmoil of middle age](#), in order to begin the continuous creative act of holding on while letting go.

This is not easy in a culture that fetishes youth, that clothes us in an invisibility cloak as life strips us of time. We could use all the help we can get — a psychological equivalent of what Eva Perón set out to do politically with her [constitutional decalogue for the dignity of growing old](#). Here is the best help I have encountered over the years — a kind of decalogue for the constitution of the inner country.

JANE ELLEN HARRISON

The first thing one must do in this culture is refute the romanticizing of youth, recalibrate the value metrics of the self, and no one has done it more concisely and creatively than **Jane Ellen Harrison** (September 9, 1850–April 15, 1928) — [one of the most daring and underappreciated intellects of the past century](#) — in her altogether [superb disquisition on youth and old age](#):

People ask: “Would you or would you not like to be young again?” Of course, it is really one of those foolish questions that never should be asked, because they are impossible. You cannot be — you that are — young again. You cannot unroll that snowball which is you: there is no “you” except your life — lived. But apart from that, when you rise from what somebody calls “the banquet of life,” flushed with the wine of life, can you want to sit down again? When you have climbed the hill, and the view is just breaking, do you want to reclimb it? A thousand times no! Anyone who honestly wants to be young again has never lived, only imagined, only masqueraded.

URSULA K. LE GUIN

At the dawn of her sixties — that threshold moment when people, women especially, first begin to feel the cold shoulder of society, the small cruelties of daily dismissal, the subtle intimations of irrelevance — **Ursula K. Le Guin** (October 21, 1929–January 22, 2018) took up the question of [what beauty really means as one grows older](#), cutting through the collagen of our cultural ideology to celebrate the most beautiful thing about growing older: how it anneals personhood, chiseling away the marble of personality to reveal the sculpture of the naked soul:

For old people, beauty doesn't come free with the hormones, the way it does for the young. It has to do with bones. It has to do with who the person is. More and more clearly it has to do with what shines through those gnarly faces and bodies.

[...]

There's something about me that doesn't change, hasn't changed, through all the remarkable, exciting, alarming, and disappointing transformations my body has gone through. There is a person there who isn't only what she looks like, and to find her and know her I have to look through, look in, look deep. Not only in space, but in time.

Also well worth reading is Le Guin's meditation on [change, menopause as rebirth, and the civilizational value of elders](#)

BERTRAND RUSSELL

In the first year of his eighties, already a Nobel laureate who had lived through two world wars, the polymathic philosopher and mathematician **Bertrand Russell** (May 18, 1872–February 2, 1970) wrote a [short essay](#) about how to grow old, anchored in this life-magnifying advice:

Make your interests gradually wider and more impersonal, until bit by bit the walls of the ego recede, and your life becomes increasingly merged in the universal life. An individual human existence should be like a river — small at first, narrowly contained within its banks, and rushing passionately past rocks and over waterfalls. Gradually the river grows wider, the banks recede, the waters flow more quietly, and in the end, without any visible break, they become merged in the sea, and painlessly lose their individual being.

HENRY MILLER

Upon turning eighty, **Henry Miller** (December 26, 1891–June 7, 1980) set down [everything he knew about growing old and the secret to remaining young at heart](#), his long reflection best distilled in this one short passage:

If you have your health, if you still enjoy a good walk, a good meal (with all the trimmings), if you can sleep without first taking a pill, if birds and flowers, mountains and sea still inspire you, you are a most fortunate individual and you should get down on your knees morning and night and thank the good Lord for his savin' and keepin' power... If you can fall in love again and again, if you can forgive your parents for the crime of bringing you into the world, if you are content to get nowhere, just take each day as it comes, if you can forgive as well as forget, if you can keep from growing sour, surly, bitter and cynical, man you've got it half licked.

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

Wading into her sixties, **Simone de Beauvoir** (January 9, 1908–April 14, 1986) looked ahead to old age in a passage of [her memoir](#) and offered her characteristically passionate yet unsentimental advice, largely to herself, as the best advice to others tends to be:

There is only one solution if old age is not to be an absurd parody of our former life, and that is to go on pursuing ends that give our existence a meaning — devotion to individuals, to groups or to causes, social, political, intellectual or creative work... In old age we should wish still to have passions strong enough to prevent us turning in on ourselves. One's life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation, compassion.

JOAN DIDION

Joan Didion (December 5, 1934–December 23, 2021) was only thirty-four when, thinking about [the value of keeping a notebook](#), she found herself shining a sidewise gleam on what may be the most important orientation we can have to ourselves as the years advance, the most important thing we can do to keep the arrow of time from becoming a deadly weapon of revisionism and regret:

I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind's door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends. We forget all too soon the things we thought we could never forget. We forget the loves and the betrayals alike, forget what we whispered and what we screamed, forget who we were.

[...]

It is a good idea, then, to keep in touch, and I suppose that keeping in touch... keeping those lines open to ourselves.

NICK CAVE

Not long after offering a thirteen-year-old some [excellent advice on how to grow up](#), **Nick Cave**, midway through his sixties, considered the two qualities cultivating which ensures that growing older is a broadening rather than a narrowing of life, a way of seeing the world with more nuance and moving through it with more tenderness:

The first is humility. Humility amounts to an understanding that the world is not divided into good and bad people, but rather it is made up of all manner of individuals, each broken in their own way, each caught up in the common human struggle and each having the capacity to do both terrible and beautiful things. If we truly comprehend and acknowledge that we are all imperfect creatures, we find that we become more tolerant and accepting of others' shortcomings and the world appears less dissonant, less isolating, less threatening.

The other quality is curiosity. If we look with curiosity at people who do not share our values, they become interesting rather than threatening. As I've grown older I've learnt that the world and the people in it are surprisingly interesting, and that the more you look and listen, the more interesting they become. Cultivating a questioning mind, of which conversation is the chief instrument, enriches our relationship with the world. Having a conversation with someone I may disagree with is, I have come to find, a great, life embracing pleasure.

KAHLIL GIBRAN

Although **Kahlil Gibran** (January 6, 1883–April 10, 1931) never lived past middle age, he was born an old soul and saw clearly the rewards of life's later years. His excellent lyric meditation on [the art of becoming yourself across the arc of life](#) is anchored in the hard-earned self-trust that steels you against the winds of circumstance:

In my youth I was but the slave of the high tide and the ebb tide of the sea, and the prisoner of half moons and full moons.

Today I stand at this shore and I rise not nor do I go down.

PABLO CASALS

Shortly after his ninety-third birthday, the legendary cellist **Pablo Casals** (December 29, 1876–October 22, 1973) [reflected on his life](#), locating the key to contentment in never ceasing to work with love, to live awake to wonder:

If you continue to work and to absorb the beauty in the world about you, you find that age does not necessarily mean getting old. At least, not in the ordinary sense. I feel many things more intensely than ever before, and for me life grows more fascinating.

Continuing to practice and perform, Casals approached his daily routine as a microcosm of that orientation:

I go to the piano, and I play two preludes and fugues of Bach. I cannot think of doing otherwise. It is a sort of benediction on the house. But that is not its only meaning for me. It is a rediscovery of the world of which I have the joy of being a part. It fills me with awareness of the wonder of life, with a feeling of the incredible marvel of being a human being. The music is never the same for me, never. Each day is something new, fantastic, unbelievable. That is Bach, like nature, a miracle!

GRACE PALEY

At the sunset of her sixties, **Grace Paley** (December 11, 1922–August 22, 2007) [took up the question of “upstaging time,”](#) ending her magnificent meditation with the parting gift of life-changing advice she herself had received from her aging father:

My father had decided to teach me how to grow old. I said O.K. My children didn't think it was such a great idea. If I knew how, they thought, I might do so too easily. No, no, I said, it's for later, years from now. And besides, if I get it right it might be helpful to you kids in time to come.

They said, Really?

My father wanted to begin as soon as possible.

[...]

Please sit down, he said. Be patient. The main thing is this — when you get up in the morning you must take your heart in your two hands. You must do this every morning.

That's a metaphor, right?

Metaphor? No, no, you can do this. In the morning, do a few little exercises for the joints, not too much. Then put your hands like a cup over and under the heart. Under the breast. He said tactfully. It's probably easier for a man. Then talk softly, don't yell. Under your ribs, push a little. When you wake up, you must do this massage. I mean pat, stroke a little, don't be ashamed. Very likely no one will be watching. Then you must talk to your heart.

Talk? What?

Say anything, but be respectful. Say — maybe say, Heart, little heart, beat softly but never forget your job, the blood. You can whisper also, Remember, remember.