

Thoughts on Getting Old

By Kay Macpherson and Vi Thompson

Vi Thompson and Kay Macpherson were both born seventy years ago in England. Vi came from an Essex shepherd's family and Kay was the daughter of a doctor whose widow, her mother, later married a ship's captain.

Vi and Kay met in Canada when Women for Political Action (WPA) was founded in 1972. Vi came from a group discussing women's liberation and Kay from Voice of Women (VOW) and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC).

They both worked in elections and campaigned for each other,

often becoming interchangeable in the eyes of the electors.

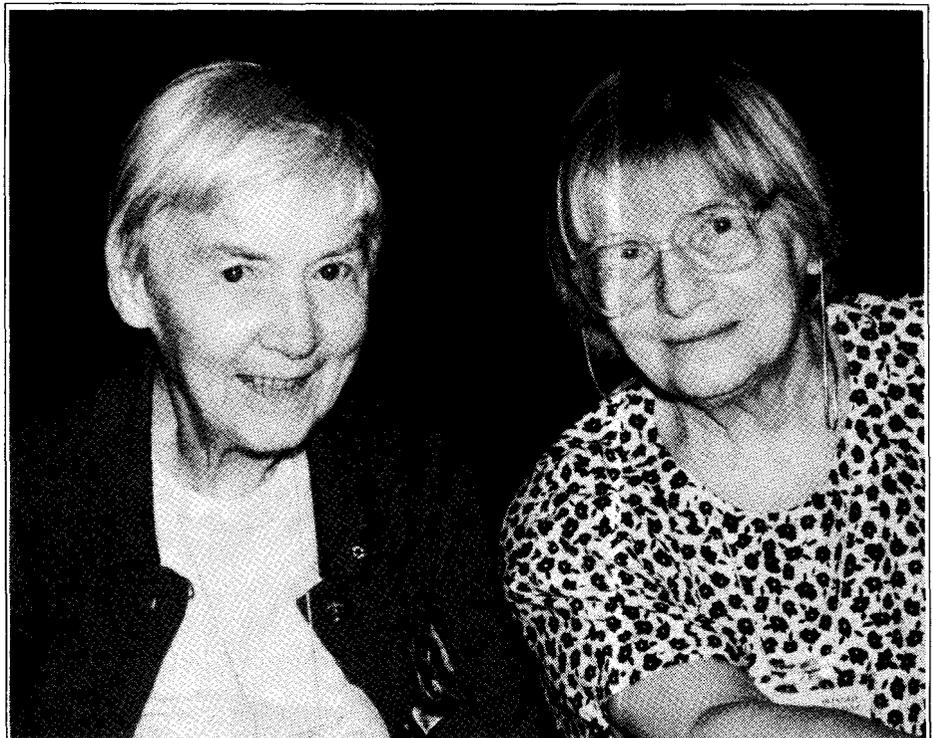
They have attended dozens of rallies, conventions, conferences, workshops, and meetings; campaigned for Rosemary Brown for New Democratic Party (NDP) leader; and worked for VOW, NAC, WPA, NDP, peace, and women's causes.

They also both gained great insight and delight from a creative writing group which they have been part of for several years.

Both women have been married for about forty years and have raised three children.

In 1983/84 Vi Thompson and Kay Macpherson, friends since the founding of Women for Political Action in 1972, wrote a series of letters to each other on how they felt about getting old. They had just celebrated their 70th birthdays.

Now that they "are really old," they are writing about dying, lost friends and family, and some of their new and good feelings and experiences. They have found that old age can be an adventure. They have had surprising experience and discoveries. Life is still exhilarating, very busy, stimulating and hardly ever dull...



Kay Macpherson (left) and Vi Thompson at 1991 NDP Convention

Kay wrote the following on New Year's Day, 1984:

Getting Old

Once one reaches the age of seventy it is no longer possible to ignore the fact that, according to statistics or general opinion or any other kind of evidence, one is definitely Old.

People face this fact in different ways. Some reluctantly retire from regular work, others move away from farm, fishing community, family business, or other surroundings which they maintained and which provided their means of living. Many of these find no meaning or stimulus to their lives and go into a sad and hopeless decline. Hundreds of old people are sentenced to deadly inaction in "senior-citizens" homes or are restricted to a lonely life in a bed-sitter with few remaining family or friends. In contrast, there are those busy individuals making an active contribution to the children and friends of an extended family and some who are advisors and helpers to a whole community.

Sometimes people prepare for old age long before they reach it. To others, often widows with little financial support, it comes as a horrible shock. One friend of mine planned to own a house where she and other aging friends could spend their declining years with someone to look after them.

I don't know how much research has been done about people's attitudes to old age and approaching death. Kübler-Ross has written about how individuals face imminent death and the stages they go through before it is accepted. Perhaps it is the same process — rejection, anger, and lastly, acceptance — which everyone eventually has to face.

There are dozens of things I still want to do, and dozens of others I wish I had done better. I now realize how important it is to keep up the tone in one's muscles and in one's gray matter. Only constant practice and exercise — physical and mental — can do this. Laziness is a dreadful threat in old age, and I am now clearly faced with that hazard.

There are hundreds of wonderful experiences which I cherish. I only wish I could remember many more of them, and far more details of so many good (and

bad) experiences which I would never want to forget, however they struck me at the time. The experience of seeing or hearing or reading or living through something which represents the essence of nature or human accomplishment is something very precious. It can range from music, painting, and the performances of Glenn Gould, Janet Baker, Gielgud, Sellers, the Beatles, Emily Carr, Baryshnikov, Pete Seeger, or June 12th, 1982, in New York, to Bach, Mozart, a cathedral or a heron poised on a deserted beach.

I owe many people my love and thanks for everything I have been given — love and affection far more than I have known how to repay or to express myself. Thanks to my family and some very special friends for trying to teach me how to be more outgoing and more self-analyzing in expressing my feelings and love for others. Some of their efforts have borne fruit, but I've a lot more to do in dealing with emotion and love, understanding and compassion. I hope I have more time to work at it.

Vi wrote this before reading Kay's January 1st piece:

Dear Kay,

Do you remember the "Geriatric Ward"? I thought then that you were attempting to come to terms with aging. Me, I was not ready.

The Geriatric Dinners were different. I saw them as becoming Consciousness-Raising for the Old Women — they didn't achieve that purpose — I wish they had. I remember Jocelyn saying with a great deal of fervency, "That's not why I came to dinner. There is too much pain. I came to forget for a while." A statement that was very salutary. But Jocelyn was not the reason for our failure to discuss — in fact her statement ought to have made us more ready to face future problems, since her pain might well come to any one of us. I suspect we did not want to show our individual fears of the future.

There's death, for one. We ought to talk about that. Most of it is probably fear of leaving this precious thing called life rather than the fear of the actual event. But there is also the monstrous idea of non-being that has to be faced — but perhaps we don't have to do any of those things. Perhaps it is better to drift along to our inevitable ends without any analysis. Per-

haps talking it out will not make the living of it any easier. But whether we sit and talk or are silent, it is most certain that we will think about it. Sometimes I feel back to those early years when the whole meaning and purpose of existence seemed a marvellous puzzle that could be solved if only one reasoned about it sufficiently — then the years of being caught up in the living of it, and only now does that subject claim attention again.

What is it all about?

Then there are the physical things — hearing, eyesight, memory, bones, muscles, circulation, and breathing — and breathing. (You're dead when you don't do that!)

And the mental things — why, having reached this age, am I not wise? I feel as though I had been promised a prize, only to find there was nothing inside the wrapping... And depression that may swoop down when the sense of uselessness becomes overpowering. And fear of what the people around think about you, "Silly old fool, no need to listen to her. Who does she think she is — she ought to leave that to the young — it's their turn to run things."

And what to do when the papery skin, the deftness and near-sightedness, the stiff joints take over.

Is that enough thought for a beginning?

Your Geriatric Sister,
Vi

Dear Vi,

When we labelled our shared room at various meetings the Geriatric Ward I didn't think it was "coming to terms with old age," as you suggest. To me it was a sort of joke. These busy, active "older women," I thought, were just having fun with our younger colleagues. I remember taking some pride in the fact that one of the young women in WPA never noticed any difference in our ages [Jan was about twenty-eight and I must have been sixty at the time she said that].

It's interesting how you tackle this situation. I think you are treating it much more profoundly and seriously than I am. As for the Geriatric Dinners [half a dozen of us over-sixties having a lively dinner together], I never analyzed them either. I never heard Jocelyn's cry about her painful feelings — perhaps I was in the kitchen. I think I've missed a good many impor-

tant conversations that way. I certainly never heard a lot of what my family and friends were saying before we sat down to dinner on so many occasions. Now I get others to do some of the salad chopping!
K.M.

THE RECENT LETTERS

Dear Vi,

It is now eight years since our last discussion on old age. Now we are really growing aged, and looking old too, no matter how little we have changed inside or how much we feel we are the same people. Fresh acquaintances meeting us know that we are creeping up to the eighty-year mark. They usually treat us like fragile pieces of furniture. I probably get more of this treatment than you do because I go around with a black-and-white striped walking stick, often feeling my way with it, and usually hobbling along. My decrepit knee joint has practically no surface left to hinge on to. I feel myself doddering along the street looking like an old lady, even though I don't really believe that I am one. That sounds crazy and maybe it is but you can understand the difference.

Love,
Kay

Dear Kay,

I certainly do understand, especially after seeing myself on TV following Bob Rae down the steps of the Medical Sciences auditorium. He bounded towards the platform with never a look down, while I was careful with every step, watching my feet all the time. Very salutary. But I wondered as I watched that picture of me how I could possibly look like that when I didn't feel like it. I am fortunate to have good sight and generally good health, but I will never forget the shock of having my doctor say after taking my blood pressure, "You can't go home, you might have a stroke." The sudden realization of how very mortal I am brought me face-to-face with the fact of old age. The blood pressure problem is now under control. There are visible signs of aging. The papery skin has begun to show on my face, delicate little wrinkles. I look at them in fascination. Now I'm going to know how granny felt when she had skin like that. More and

more often people are getting up and offering me their seat on the bus or subway. What it is like not to see properly? No, that I do not know.

Love,
Vi

Dear Vi,

We talked about not wanting to be a burden in our first exchange of letters. I said that I did not want a slow and painful death. This is still a worry. The increased attention to Alzheimer's disease makes me wonder every time I forget a name or a fact whether this is the first sign. But one cannot worry all the time. It's interesting to try different ways of remembering and concentrating consciously, determining to remember.

Not wanting to be a burden makes me more interested in housing for old people and the handicapped. It is something that we ought to attend to.

Love,
Kay

Dear Kay,

Being a burden, housing for the aged, these are things on my mind also. I have acquired a list of all the housing, nursing homes, etc. that there are in Metro, but that is as far as I've got. I expect I think that since there are two of us the matter is not of such urgency.

I have other things on my mind, like making a living will. The only viewpoint I can find on this matter is that of "Dying with Dignity." I need more information.

I think of how much I have learned during these last eight years. People have given me more respect than dreamed of; they have also urged me to take on more tasks and do more things, not less. This has been a wonderful morale booster.

I love to contemplate the more than seventy years of history that I can remember, and to imagine what will come next. The ability to learn is a joy. It is also wonderful to be free of the inhibitions of youth, to do and say outrageous things. Old age is an adventure, just as those two marvellous old psychologists, Joan and Erik Erikson said when they were interviewed on CBC radio.

Love,
Vi

Dear Vi,

A lot of things have happened to me in the past eight years. From being married with three grown children and a grandson, I am now a widow with two daughters and a grandson twice the size he was eight years ago. That means that there have been a lot of upheavals and adjustments. It also means many new friends, and situations which are challenging and sometimes quite wonderful. Now I can confess that one of the things that I am very bad at doing is accepting help graciously; in fact, I am downright rude and churlish about friendly offers of help. Another is my tendency to reject well-meaning proposals and suggestions for improving my situation, only to come around to acknowledging sooner or later, that the idea was a good one and I whole-heartedly agree with it. One of my friends, whose husband died several years ago, joined the many who wisely advised me not to rush into quick changes and re-arrangements of my life. She said, "Give yourself time to grieve." It was not necessary to regret all the lost opportunities and time wasted on less important things than enjoying and caring and learning about one's mate; just relax into grief and wait for the healing process of time. It is good advice from one who has gone on alone and with many new friends, to greater efforts in the causes both had worked for all their lives.

Love,
Kay

Dear Kay,

So many of my friends are widows. Your note on grieving has renewed my sense of thankfulness that this year I have been given a new opportunity to appreciate just how much my husband means to me. These past six months have been a turmoil of emotions as I looked at the possibility of his death and then the reprieve. How fortunate I am to have learned this now. Of course I do not suppose that my behaviour will be very different, but I will always have that sense of joy that I have learned how much I care for him.

Yours,
Vi

Dear Vi,

One of the saddest things about grow-

ing old is that friends and family members die before we do. Gradually there are fewer and fewer people who can respond when we say, "Remember when or how or what we did?" Fewer people who can answer when we ask, "Where was it?" or "When was it?" or "Who was it?" when we wrack our forgetful brains for details from the past. It's such fun to remember things together — to remind one another of the details; funny, awful, terrifying, blissful. All those gaps leave a hollow feeling in one's stomach, or is it in one's heart? It's such a lonely feeling to be the only one who remembers.

Maybe it's worse to remember the younger ones who have died, because, along with the fund of happy or even dreadful memories is the added aching speculation of how things might have been, what we might have done, if they were still with us.

But after all, who would ever want not to have had those memories? We know "'Tis is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all."

Love,
Kay

Dear Kay,

Thank you for your "Remember When" piece. There is so much sadness in thinking about friends who have died, who can no longer share with us. I have just lost my old school friend, Kathy. She had known me longer than anyone else in Canada, nearly sixty-five years. No one can replace her. And now another friend has died. She was only fifty-five. She too had shared a large part of my life. It is such a waste when these people who are not yet old, die. You too wonder about what it would be like if they were still with us. I think of my son who died over twelve years ago and I long to talk with him about today's world situation. We need these people and they are gone. We can never eradicate these sadnesses of youth, which while devastating at the time, once gone are gone for ever.

Death is on my mind a lot, though not in any morbid sense, but out of a great wonder. How can we be at one moment and not be at the next? How do we face extinction? I do not exactly fear death, but I find myself incapable of comprehending the idea of non-existence, and I want to con-

tinue to be.

Do we heed Dylan Thomas' injunction, "Do not go gentle into that good night"? And if we heed him and struggle and scream (if we have breath left to do it), won't it cause anguish to those we love? And what do we scream about? The blackness itself? The pains great or small? The end of usefulness? The failure? Better surely to save energy and go on working for the things we believe in right up to the very end, right up to the great darkness.

And then, I read again, "The Tightrope Walker" by that enchanting author, Dorothy Gilman. At the beginning of the book there is a quotation, "The important thing is to carry the sun with you inside of you every moment against the darkness. For there will be a great and terrible darkness."

When I come to that great darkness a warm hand on mine will keep the sun with me to the end.

I really am incapable of imagining a painful death, or a death preceded by me wanting to have my life over. If that is to be I will just have to deal with it when it comes.

As a child I used to wonder how those old people could go about their daily lives with smiles on their faces — when death was just around the corner for them. Now I understand. Each day has become a magnificent gift, the blue of the sky is brighter, the trees greener, the gifts of love and friendship more wondrous.

I long to feel that my life has had some influence on the progress of the world, some meaning. I think it is a desire for immortality. Here are some of my thoughts on that gathered from books, from friends, from other people and some from my own mind. We leave behind us not only our ashes and sometimes our genes, we also leave behind us our thinking, our influence on the lives of others. I think of myself as inheriting, not only genes but also the ideas, the behaviour, the sense of right and wrong, the particular set of mind which makes me choose one way of acting rather than another, so that the person I am is made up of all those other people who have ever touched my life, and their forbears. In the same way we each will pass on our own ideas, our own sense of right and wrong. And so the world, the earth is renewed and conserved by each one of us.

Tell me what you think.

Vi

Dear Vi,

Here are some of my thoughts on immortality. I asked some friends what they thought about it. One of them said that she never thought about it, but she did enjoy doing things with her grandson. Out of that came the thought that he was having the experience of his grandmother, some of which would be carried on through him.

I remember how when Brough died a friend sent me a copy of the eulogy written by Pericles for the young men killed in the Peloponnesian Wars:

They received each for their own memory, praise that will never die, and with it the grandest of all sepulchres, not that in which their mortal bones are laid, but a home in the minds of human beings, where their glory remains fresh to stir to speech or action as the occasion comes by. For the whole earth sepulchre of the famous ones and their story is not graven only on stone over their native earth, but lives on far away without visible symbol, woven into the stuff of other mortal souls.

And there are the tangible things we leave behind, such as our writings, things we have made, and photographs to stir the memories in other people to pass on ideas, inspiration or comfort.

Love,
Kay

CORRECTION

In the last issue of *Canadian Woman Studies* (Volume 12, Number 1), "Violence against Women: Strategies for Change," we published a summary of a project report entitled "Wife Assault as a Crime" (p. 113).

The citation for this article should read: "prepared by Peter Jaffe, principal investigator; Deborah Reitzel, research coordinator; Elaine Hastings, community/training coordinator; and Gary Austin, research consultant."