



THOUGHTS ON GETTING OLD



Kay Macpherson ►
and
◀ Vi Thompson

Nées il y a 70 ans en Angleterre, les auteures se sont rencontrées quand le mouvement "Women for Political Action" fut fondé en 1972: elles ont travaillé ensemble, depuis, pour une variété de projets et de causes. Elles ont toutes les deux été mariées pendant 40 ans et ont élevé trois enfants. Dans leur correspondance, elles explorent l'une et l'autre leurs sentiments envers la vieillesse. C'est avec exaltation, espoir et énergie — et le sentiment qu'elles ont encore tant à apprendre — qu'elles font toutes les deux face au futur.

INTRODUCTION

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. Now they are facing the prospect of old age.

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.

Is this how I face getting old and dying? Feelings about oneself are tied up with feelings about friends and relatives. One sees them becoming frail, unable to carry on work or to look after themselves or their families. Others die suddenly or slowly, accidentally, painfully, horribly, or perhaps peacefully and calmly. Until the end of my sixties, apart from a few physical defects and deteriorations which annoyed me, I carried on with some semblance of a normal — meaning middle-aged — existence. I'm still trying to live that way. But seventy is such a decisive number, all tied up as it is with "three score years and ten" myths. So now, how do I record and analyse my reactions and feelings about getting old and dying? Let's write down a few. First, the gloom-and-doom department.

Sadness — That sooner or later I'll be leaving this wonderful and fascinating world. I remember Amelia Smith, an old and valiant "Voice" from Calgary, at the age of eighty-three or so saying, "I can't die yet. I want to see how it all turns out." I feel the same curiosity mixed with some fear and dread. We humans seem so greedy and stupid we may wreck it all.

— That one by one my dear friends and family are beginning to crack up and leave us. And the "us" changes to "me" if I live longer than they do. Often the anticipation is almost as painful as the actual event. On the other hand, there are so many memories to enjoy. Only the few who are left can still appreciate the weird and wonderful situations we lived through and shared.

Fear of becoming a burden, a responsibility, a drain on the resources and morale of family and friends. I don't want them to have to cope with a helpless, incompetent, irresponsible old person.

Scared — Anticipation of how I will die. I envy those who die suddenly or painlessly, and fear all slow and painful ways of dying. The prospect of a lingering and painful death or, worse still, deterioration into helpless senility frightens me. I think I would want to be able to choose to die in those circumstances. But by then I suppose it would be too late to choose.

Regret, like Amelia Smith, at not seeing "how it all turns out." But if our planet doesn't survive man's machinations, then I suppose it might be better not to be around. I can only mourn for those who may have to face the holocaust — our children and their children and all those other innocents.

Now what about the good things in growing old.

Age and experience have made me better able to cope with those self-conscious feelings of embarrassment, fear, diffidence, shyness, non-assertiveness, fear of doing the wrong thing, saying something stupid, and all those awkward moments that plagued me when I was younger. Now I don't mind so much what people think of me, and I feel more that I must speak up and do things that I would never have attempted before. We old types may be written off, but sometimes people listen to us or watch us with

some degree of approval or agreement. So let's jump in with both feet! We've nothing to lose but a little dignity. I'm still amazed when anyone listens attentively to what I'm saying. Usually I expect them to be thinking, "What does that old dame think she knows, anyway?" or "Does she really think she can tell us something?" But it's a great feeling when someone says something great like Terry's "When I grow up I want to be Kay Macpherson," or Muriel's to the U.S. Immigration, "But she's my best friend." However, there's a fine line between playing the "old codger" and "the voice of experience" and overplaying the role until people write one off as an ineffectual voice from the past. It is necessary to button one's lip when someone says, "I've got a terrific idea," and refrain from saying "We tried that and it didn't work" or "What's new about that?" or later "I told you so." There are ways of pointing out pitfalls or letting others find them out for themselves without being an obnoxious know-it-all wet blanket. It can be fascinating listening to others going through all the arguments and eventually arriving just where one is oneself in the whole discussion.

However, old codgers can be useful in helping younger women discover their history. Remembering is fun, especially when several people talking together have different memories of shared experiences. It's a good idea when reconstructing past histories to have several of those who were present at the time make a tape of their recollections. They can vary wildly but can contribute to a more accurate whole than one individual's memory, and the people concerned may never all come together again. Such a reminiscing session can be fascinating and sometimes very funny, as different perceptions clash. ("I never said anything of the sort," "Oh yes, we all heard it," and so on.)

To get on with the good things:

The "Old Girls" network. Because I'm a member of several women's organizations, I am lucky to have near and dear friends scattered all over the country and overseas too. Many of them are far from Toronto, and communication tends to mean large telephone bills, since I find contacts are better kept up verbally than by letter (if one can afford it!). Ma Bell's midnight-to-8 a.m. cheaper rates are well used. It's good to be able to travel to many places in Canada and to pick up with close friends and their families even after several years' lapse in communication. We know we have a solid base of mutual interests which brings us together. Without these contacts how would I ever have known Hornby Island, Doak, Hedley, Woody Point, Blewett and Kootenay Bay, Conception Harbour, Grand Manan, St. Ours, Milford, or Austin? It can be a few months since we met, or ten years. It's wonderful to meet again with spry little women still dashing around as full of energy and ideas as ever. Others fill me with admiration at the courage and good humour with which they have met and faced all kinds of disastrous situations and tragedies.

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 performance of Glenn Gould, Janet Baker, Gielgud, Sellers, the Beatles, Emily Carr, Baryshnikov, Pete Seager, 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 out-giving and more self-analysing 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. Perhaps 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 deafness and near-sightedness, the stiff joints take over.

Is that enough thought for a beginning?

Your Geriatric Sister,
Vi.

12.6.83.

RESPONSE TO VI'S FIRST NOTE

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 analysed 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 important 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.

VI'S RESPONSE TO "GETTING OLD"

Dear Kay,

I write in response to your "Getting Old."

Feelings are what interest me most. I often won-

dered why old people didn't talk about what it was like to have death just around the corner. They seemed to have some secret knowledge about it which allowed them to smile and carry on with their daily lives. Were they only obeying tradition and keeping quiet about their fears? Or had they been socialized into thinking it is a poor, weak, feminine thing to express emotions about anything? So I am glad when you speak about sadness, fears, regrets, pleasure. You do it in a summing-up fashion, just like my friends Molly and Kathy adding to my apprehension that seventy is the great barrier, the end of real life and the beginning of that Kübler-Ross resignation and final acceptance. But my dear friend Shirleen does not see it like that. She sees it as an attainment. "Thompson," she says, "it's a wonderful age. Seventy. Think of how many people don't make it."

Of course it is up to us what we do with the future. Do we use it profitably and freely or do we mould away under the weight of laziness that silts the mind as well as the joints and muscles, bringing on depression. What use cleaning a house? What use attempting to put words on paper, weaving them together to make a coherent, interesting whole? What use organizing people for campaigns, what use? In such a mood,

that last black door is inviting, until I remember that there is nothing on the other side, and I cannot comprehend NOTHING. So I stir and move and shake out the silt and dare to get on with the job of living.

It is good that we have been able to experience a bridging of the generation gap during these last fifteen years. Sisterhood is real, no matter the age. How powerful it might be if we cultivated it more. We need to use the strength and ardour of the young, to share with them their idealism and purpose along with the knowledge and experience we have gained. We must also give the young time to accept us. Old people are scary to them. They often see us as redundant. Last fall a young woman at a high-school conference on disarmament said, "Look at the mess the old people have got us into. They should get out and let us put things right." But isn't that where we started too? Wanting to shove the old ones aside or perhaps being told, "Well, we've done our bit. It's your turn now." So I think that when we are with young people we need to listen to them closely when they speak of a "terrific idea." It may be the same idea that failed for us, or there may be enough variation for it to be worth trying, using the new wrinkle. It may be that the old "failed" idea was wrong for the time when we tried it, but the time may be right now. The weight of influence may have shifted, there may be more people willing to give it a try, so not only do we refrain from saying "we tried it, it won't work," but we listen positively and anew, and perhaps this time it will work.

There is still so much to learn. So many surprises each day, discoveries in medicine, about space, about the flow and interaction between people. I thrill like a child at a vision of a world no longer drawn into mad destruction but united against poverty, hunger, and war. I am awed at the beauty of a morning bright in sunlight.

I am not ready to sum up my life yet. I want to explore and learn. I want to become more orderly, more courageous, and more loving. I want to be less the "Wee, sleekit, cowrin' timrous beastie" which I still am, in spite of moments of bravado.

I have not commented on memories, or family, or friends. There are still many areas of feeling to be explored, but for now, thanks for the opportunity to share with you.

Oh! One last thing. No euthanasia, if you please. At least let me have the right to choose.

Vi.

Kay Macpherson, past president of Voice of Women, National Action Committee on the Status of Women, and Association of Women Electors, has run as a candidate for election to Parliament and was made a member of the Order of Canada in June, 1982.

Vi Thompson, who has run as a candidate for election to Parliament, is active in Women for Political Action, her local riding association, and Voice of Women.

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