Mary Meigs — Photo: Jane Hastings

ON AGING

Mary Meigs

C'est en centrant son article sur une conversation entre quatre femmes âgées lesbiennes, dont trois artistes, que l'auteure discute de la vieillesse. Toutes les quatre sont d'accord sur un certain nombre de points: elles ont moins d'énergie qu'auparavant, elles font les choses plus lentement, et elles ont moins de mémoire. Elles reconnaissent toutes l'aspect vivifiant de vivre ouvertement leur vie de lesbiennes.

L'auteure se rend compte qu'elle n'a pas encore commencé à souffrir du mépris général envers les femmes âgées ni du sentiment d'invisibilité. Récemment, le problème de la vieillesse est devenu un sujet féministe, et des livres remarquables ont été publiés pendant ces dix dernières années, comme, par exemple, May Sarton As we are now. *Le vieille femme artiste, lesbienne ou non, est respectée même par la société patriarcale. Elle a survécu et s'est prouvée elle-même comme artiste. Le manque de visibilité des artistes lesbiennes de plus de 65 ans est lentement en train de changer, en partie à cause de celles qui sont devenues connues après leur mort — Willa Cather, Ivy Compton Burnett et Elizabeth Bishop, par exemple — et qui ont donné du pouvoir aux femmes âgées en général.*

Four of us gather, all lesbians just below or just above senior status, two who have been married and divorced and have grown children, and two who have never married; our purpose is to discuss aging. I have sought out the others to enlarge or confirm my own experience and

find that we have much in common, particularly a determination to make the changes of age work for us, to make new creative constellations of changes that are forced on us. All four of us are still actively thinking and working. Jane Gapen, Barbara Deming, and I are painters or writers or both and have always had a sense of vocation. Ruth, who has changed her married surname to Dreamdigger, did not feel herself to be an artist and did not suffer the frustration, as Jane did, of an artist-mother. Her children are a source of deep happiness to her. Her vocation has been non-violent action for peace and against nuclear weapons, and the study of human relations; she has worked with disturbed and economically deprived children and though nominally retired now belongs to the Movement for a New Society, an organization which stresses personal growth, and she works in a general way in conflict resolution and peer counselling. She was moved to change her name to Dreamdigger because she uses dreams to understand herself and in her work with others, not to discover neuroses as Freud did, but to discover the multiple layers of conscious and unconscious being, the creative complexity of every human being. Jane Gapen, who has written a fictional autobiography, *Something Not Yet Ended,* and is also a poet and a painter, is now concentrating on painting. She says that as an aging woman her creative life can be more fully expressed in painting than in words. As I look at her recent work, I feel that the poet and painter are still in equilibrium and that she has found a visual poetic language for states of being beyond words. But at this point in the conversation, when Jane is suggesting that looking inward and outward is more in harmony with the physical truth of her aging, I say that I now have the impulse both to look and to push and prod my brain and force it to think. "Writing is what makes me know my mind is alive," I say. Later, writing this, I feel this aliveness, sitting on a platform built on the spreading branches of a big banyan tree, leaning against one of its thick trunks, as I think about our four-way conversation and watch two warblers hop along the branches above me and a turkey vulture sail overhead close enough to see its red hood, and it seems to me that the integration of thinking and seeing and finding both words and images is as essential to me as the circulation of my blood.

We all agree about two things: that we have less energy than we used to and that we do things more slowly. We like to do things at our own pace and we hate to be hurried. We take longer to get started in the morning; we putter around; we forget what we are looking for in the refrigerator; we forget names. Forgetfulness and how to combat it is something we discuss with eager despair. We all make lists. I say I like to make lists of things to be done, then to check them off one by one. Jane says that the making of a list tempts her to think that the things *have* been done. But lists do not prevent us from having the blanks that seem to accompany the effort to remember something. These blanks are like an impenetrable fog interposed between the mind and what it seeks to remember. A certain amount of forcing will further thought, but memory is as uncertain as grace; no effort will summon it, only the paradox of forgetting what one wants to remember. Then the memory will suddenly appear, perhaps the next day, like a tropical fish swimming in front of one's mind. The patience to wait to remember has to be learned. Barbara thinks of these thought-blanks as times of unconscious growth; she loses herself in them and finds that just as sleep solves problems, so blanks have their subconscious power to clarify thought that will only get muddled if it is forced. Age gives us leisure to turn what may seem like its negative aspects — absent-mindedness, forgetfulness — into states akin to trance. Barbara has always complained about her slow and painful struggle to think and write, but her work is evidence of the creative energy of meditation, and aging provides new forms of meditation.

Both Barbara and Jane seem to float with the current of age, almost to welcome the reasons it gives them to live in harmony with the physical process of aging. Ruth uses memory to coax dreams up from the subconscious, and her creative life consists of digging out the multiplicity of meaning in her own dreams and those of others and using them as a path to understanding. Every day's harvest of dreams expands her cosmos of images and of clues to human behaviour. It is an endless source of nourishment, unaffected by age. I say that my forgetfulness has begun to prevent me from remembering dreams, that those I remember are fragments that have none of the old beauty and resonances. But she insists that I can train myself to remember.

When we talk about physical symptoms apart from forgetfulness, we all laugh. My hands don't obey me as well, I say. I drop things. Barbara says that her hands tremble so that she can no longer do speedwriting, or rather that she can't read what she has written and has had to give it up, a real grief to her. And one realizes, reading her work, how important speedwriting has been to her when she wanted to write accounts of conversations or meetings as immediate and true as life. Nor can she type as fast and surely as she used to. And I think of my own fear — that my own hands, which have begun to draw quivering lines on occasion, will refuse my instructions to make a detailed drawing or to control the painting of the eyes or the mouth in a portrait. I remember hearing that Renoir, with a paintbrush strapped to his arthritic right hand, was able, having looked intently at his portrait, to place a highlight precisely in an eye. If one has never tried to do this, one cannot know the difference a fraction of an inch can make in the direction the eye is looking or its intensity. Renoir was guided by a lifetime of accuracy like a Zen archer; perhaps my shakiness will move me in the direction of greater freedom and less fussiness. Our disabilities have to be turned to use in the sense of opening new ways.

Still, there are disabilities that cannot be transformed and that take the form of annoyances and restrictions.

All four of us get tired easily and have to go to bed relatively early. I fall into what I call my stupors, days when nothing seems to work, body or mind, when the mind is like a leftover pudding and the body feels infinitely old and creaky. We laugh over our nights, punctuated by trips to the bathroom, by the fear sometimes of not getting there quickly enough, by having to get back to sleep again — as though we were waked by an alarm clock two or three times a night.

We are all in agreement about the life-giving aspects of having come out as lesbians. I have found my life as a writer, I have shed my fears, am no longer secretive and defensive with my siblings, I have many new friends and a new sense of ease with them. All this happened after the age of fifty-five and is still true ten years later. I have never found that age makes me invisible to other lesbians even when I am the only senior lesbian present in a group, as I often am in Quebec. There is more emphasis on looking young among lesbians in Quebec than there is in the United States. I know senior lesbians who dye their hair, have their faces lifted, and have the satisfaction of feeling younger when they do these things. I do not think that every effort to resist the visible effects of aging should be blamed on the patriarchy; it can be a way of saying, "I look younger to myself; therefore I feel younger."

As I think about aging, I realize that I have not yet begun to suffer from the general contempt for older women and from a sense of my invisibility. I have only felt it once, last year in Italy when I saw myself as I was seen there — a white-haired old woman wearing slacks and running shoes, without a wedding ring, without a husband, when the stereotype of the old-maid lesbian was clamped on me inescapably and prompted a quite unfamiliar kind of rudeness and impatience. Some people, both men and women, went out of their way to be helpful, but for the first time it came to me as a shock what it means in a macho country to be old and single. And, too, for the first time I felt literally invisible to the young. When I went to France, I encountered single women more or less like me, and in Quebec I was back in the land where lesbians, old or young, recognize each other and exchange smiles.

Quite recently, the problem of ageism has become a topic for discussion in feminist consciousness-raising sessions, and like many once-invisible minorities, aging women are becoming vocal and visible. Remarkable books have been written in the last decade, such as May Sarton's novel *As We Are Now,* in which the rest home where Caro, the aging heroine is confined, is a metaphor for the ugly psychological and physical suffocation which old age can bring. Like that other Caro in *The Stone Angel,* this one preserves a precious remnant of dignity and dies with it. Another book written by an aging woman is *Look Me in the Eye* by Barbara Macdonald with Cynthia Rich, her younger lover, in which they look unsparingly at the patriarchy's imposed view of old women and its blueprint for integrating them into its machinery.

We four who are talking are lucky to have each other and to be part of the wider conversation and sharing of experience of all women. In the course of our talk I ask the two mothers what it has meant to them to be mothers, if it is comforting now as they enter old age. Jane says, "Well, motherhood is one of the sacraments." Another of the sacraments is art, she thinks: art, too, is a giving-birth, as necessary to the human spirit as biological truth. Jane has lived through difficult times with her children, but now they are there for her, they phone her, they worry about her, are friends. I ask her if her idea about the sacrament of motherhood doesn't give her a kind of absolution, a sense of having the right to be a lesbian because she has sacrificed to the patriarchal idea of women's role. I say that those of us who didn't want to be mothers have felt the obligation to work twice as hard to prove ourselves as artists, to overcome society's wish to diminish us, as women artists and as lesbians. Jane's life as an artist was slowed by years of child-care, but the children seem to have enriched the very life that was slowed down by them. Ruth was able to combine her children with her outside work and says that they have always given her and still do give her great joy. She describes Christmas in her old house in West Philadelphia when her biological family together with her ex-husband and her "hodaka" family were all gathered happily together. She has discovered the widest meaning of "family." She has lived the whole spectrum of women's experience: as lover (she had men lovers before her marriage), as wife and mother and grandmother, and now as lesbian. She has a feeling of completeness, and her work with dreams and Tarot cards is completing her in a new way, in the unity of conscious and subconscious.

It is striking that none of us has a feeling of bitterness or defeat or of the horror of old age. I think this is true, for Jane and Barbara and me, at least, because the old-woman artist, lesbian or not, is respected even by patriarchal society. She has survived and she is allowed her physical disabilities and eccentricities if she produces acceptable evidence of herself as artist. One thinks of Georgia O'Keefe, of Sonya Delaunay, of Käthe Kollwitz and Emily Carr. The older we get without falling into senility, the more we surprise people by the fact that we are still there, still working. Lesbian artists over sixty-five who have come out are likely to be snubbed or obliterated by the patriarchy but that, too, is changing little by little, partly because of those who have come out posthumously, so to speak, through disclosures about their lives: Willa Cather, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Elizabeth Bishop, all of whom have such a secure place in literature that they cannot now be excommunicated because they were lesbians. These women who kept their secret until they died give added power to aging lesbian artists and to aging women in general — the old-women power which is essential to all of us, old and young, engaged in the feminist revolution.

Mary Meigs (born 1917) is a painter and writer now living in Québec. Her two books, Lily Briscoe, a Self-Portrait *and* The Medusa Head, *were published by Talonbooks in 1981 and 1983.*