



Of a certain AGE

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Columnist

Being vulnerable

How do you know when you're old? When the person looking back at you in the mirror has wrinkles and gray hair? Maybe a medical condition signals the advancement of years — arthritis, forgetfulness, joint replacement or repair, failing eyesight, or congestive heart failure.

You may catch yourself reading the obituaries more frequently and more thoroughly. Funerals and memorial services for friends and family become a more frequent occurrence. Maybe you've taken to wearing more purple and considering that red hat in the store window.

Whatever the clues have

been for you, it's usually a gradual process in which you morph over time from that energetic, motivated, busy 50-year old to a mellower, more thoughtful version of yourself, who remembers with fondness those long-time friends who "knew you when," and, if you're lucky, are still there as the keepers of all that you have been and done.

I am very fortunate to have a handful of men and women whom I have known my entire life. This is the year we are all turning 75 and each one's birthday is an opportunity to reflect on a lifetime of shared memories, love, and caring. As I have been sending birthday salutations to friends, I realize we are at the three-quarters-of-a-century mark and reflect on all we've accomplished since our early days of childhood.

For the past few years, my aging body and declining physical abilities have served as reminders that the end is much closer than the long-ago beginning. I've never feared dying, and my work with hospice only gave me a greater appreciation for this grand adventure called life.

What I have feared is the steady reduction of financial resources, which definitely contributes to a sense

of vulnerability. Needing to hire someone to do all those things I have previously taken care of myself is not always fiscally possible. Repairs get left undone and my sense of competence and independence dwindles.

This past year the idea that I am "getting older" has been front and center in my thinking, rather than a faint awareness tucked comfortably in the background. Last month, as I shoveled snow in my backyard to clear a path for the propane delivery man to get to my completely empty tank, a bolt of awareness hit me when I misstepped and ended up squatting in snow that held me captive. Even with my shovel as a stabilizer, my legs betrayed me and I couldn't stand up.

In that instant, "getting older" changed from a vague concept into harsh reality. There are things in my life, and the way I live it, that have changed. The questions of "can" I still be climbing up on the ladder to clean the gutters has changed to "should" I? How much risk is reasonable to take?

The exertion it took to force my way out of the snow left me shaking and feeling physically sick. Okay, time to say uncle. I went in the house and called

my son in Bend who is my go-to handyman.

Undoubtedly, the fact that my son and his wife left two days later to move to Phoenix has influenced my sense of vulnerability. Josh has been my backup, my emergency contact, my security in just knowing he was there the last two years. In the past, having neither son nearby was no big deal but this move felt very different — and that surprised me.

Something switched in my being at that moment and I thought, "I'm old," as tears welled. Not 85 or 90, but certainly a long way from older middle-age.

Something freeing has occurred in my soul since my icy struggle. I have given myself permission to not place unrealistic expectations on myself. Instead of mentally berating myself if I fall asleep watching the news, I am happy to have had a little nap and glad I missed

some of the contentious, depressing news stories.

I am acknowledging all the good work I have done in my life, as a mother, therapist, friend, volunteer, and in all the various jobs and endeavors I have undertaken throughout my life. It's time to choose to do those things I love and let go of the rest.

The way I think, what I value, and how I choose to spend my time has definitely changed, as have my physical abilities.

Perhaps one of the most important recent changes has been how I view vulnerability: not as weakness to avoid or deny or fear. Rather, I choose to embrace vulnerability as making me more approachable, more willing to ask for and allow others to help me, a falling away of armor built up over a lifetime of challenges and successes. Being vulnerable allows me to let more good in and let more good out.

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