

# Living with Age

by David McReynolds

When I was very young – perhaps ten – I thought I should write down what it felt like to be a child. I couldn't really write at the time, so those memories soon dimmed. I can only recall bits and pieces of childhood. I can remember, as if watching a video, myself as a child, standing at the kitchen sink, washing dishes, while outside, in the pleasant Los Angeles evening, hearing the occasional shouts of other children. I wanted urgently to be out, to slip into the darkness, wearing it like a mask. Joining that tribe to which we belonged and from which we were soon enough be expelled by time.

The memories of running across the vacant lots of Southwest Los Angeles, where the builders had not yet come, running through the green fields without being weary.

The annual firestorm of Christmas trees gathered on the large vacant lot at 92<sup>nd</sup> Street where, under the watchful eye of the retired cop who volunteered for the event, we brought all the Christmas trees we, the tribe, had gathered in our various backyards, to be set afire. A great blaze, drawing people from blocks away who thought perhaps a house was burning. As the trees turned to charcoal, we roasted marshmallows around the edges of destruction. This grand event was organized by us, not by our parents.

The magic shows my brother and I put on in Pete Walker's back yard, charging a penny for admission, with games, magic tricks and Kool aid.

Healing potions made of the poisonous oleander with their sickly sweet pink blossoms, compounded with red berries. Applied to scratches they, at least, did no harm. The indifference to death, as, lucky children that we were, we knew none who had crossed that line.

The willow trees in our backyard, and I, thin, clumsy child, holding court from the lowest crotch of the tree, while other children (including the girls) climbed higher, looking down on me, wearing a crown of willow twigs, prince of the tree. (Children need a ruler, particularly one, like Queen Elizabeth, having no power, only filling a tribal need).

With my friend Marilyn, writing letters to Indian chiefs, promising to aid them in securing arms to redo the terrible injustice we had done them. (Where did I learn about those violations when I was still in kindergarten. And they could not have been actual letters - only scribbles on paper. I had not yet learned to read, let alone write – perhaps those scribbles are buried in an FBI file?).

Firecrackers, sparklers, and rockets on July 4<sup>th</sup>. Most glorious day.

The way time slowed heading to Christmas morning and the stockings hung with grand surprises. From Thanksgiving on, time crawled, though we were comforted by our father reading, each night, a portion of Dickens' Christmas Carol. Never did I get the BB gun I so desperately wanted.

Watching the clock at school, its hands crawling, almost stopping, from 2:30 on its way to 3 and freedom. Of course time moved slowly, we being new to this world, each hour, a substantial fraction of our total time in this existence.

We are all unique – the one thing, perhaps, we hold in common. How many boys would want to wear a crown of willow branches? Each of us filled with secrets. But that book on childhood was never written. And by now we have forgotten the secrets of the tribe.

Once, as my time at UCLA came to an end, I sat in my little Model A Ford, born in 1929, the same year as I, talking with my friend, Wayne, telling him I felt very old. Not only was childhood gone, but the time of youth was fading, I was being thrust forward into whatever lay ahead. It wasn't going to be a time of running without growing weary, it wasn't going to be summer vacations and the adventures of exploring the world I had never known. I felt ancient, knowing what I had lost forever.

Of course for each thing there is a season. When, in my early forties, I stumbled drunkenly into alcoholism, there seemed only darkness. And when, in 1975, I emerged sober, it was as if a new life had opened, a second birthday.

So our lives change, season by season. Now I am in “the season of the end”, though that will be yet a while. (Perhaps more of “a while” than I expect – not long ago I attended a party given by Clark Whelton, who had been associated with the Village Voice in the old days, in honor of Jerry Tallmer and Ed Fancher. who turns 90 this year. I didn't know Tallmer, but I did know Ed and he looked much more like a man reaching 70, than one nearing 90). These are reflections, for those much younger than me, wondering what they can expect.

Already, sometime from age 60 on, our world begins to change radically. If we were lucky, as I was, then when we were children death was abstract – we were surrounded not only by parents, but by grandparents, sometimes by great grand parents. Aunts and uncles abounded. But that world changes as the grandparents are removed from the board, then our parents, and at some point a cousin or two. By my age there are cousins, brothers, sisters, nephews and nieces, but not a single parent, aunt or uncle can be found. We are steadily pounded with news of deaths, memorial services for friends we had known as children, in high school, in college. Old lovers are gone. Comrades vanish in a haze of dementia.

Most disturbing is the realization that where, only yesterday, all the authority figures in our lives – police officers, judges, doctors, dentists, pastors, psychiatrists – were considerably older than us, they have now retired, or died, and we are in consultation with and advised by young men and women. We always resist accepting the “age in which we find ourselves” – it is, always, new territory. We are uneasy in it. When we were children, we were as old at that time as we had ever been and felt irritation with adults who told us we had quite a future ahead of us. To us, we “were already there”, not waiting to become something. (Though I remember when I was in Jr. high, living in a body which had leaped to six feet, with three inches still to go, I had the distinct

feeling I was “holding this body for the person who would come along and take charge of it”. I felt I was a child stuck in a very tall, badly coordinated body).

When we reach old age we do not realize we are there. We can look around us and see others who are old but we find it difficult to think of ourselves as old. We have never been old before and are not eager to claim this particular turf. We note the change in how beggars approach us. Where once it was “brother” it becomes “sir”, then “doctor”. We find old age in our mail box which blossoms with ads for hearing aids and, most recently, for wonderful mobile chairs.

I pass the corner at Bowery and East Fourth where I stopped to chat with Allen Ginsberg, and he had whipped out his little camera to take a shot of me, and I whipped out mine to take a shot of him. Now he is gone. (And I never did find the snap shot of Allen which I had taken). I pass the spot on Second Ave. and 10<sup>th</sup> Street where I had coffee with Seymour Krim. He was already very ill with emphysema. We chatted. Not long after, weary of being weary, he took an overdose. I dialed his phone by error a few weeks after his death and got a cheerful note from beyond the grave - the apartment hadn't yet been rented, the old message was still on the machine. I pass Quentin Crisp's apartment building where he rented one somewhat shabby room. It is on my way to the Catholic Worker's Maryhouse, where I joined the wake when Dorothy Day had died, her body laid out in a plain wooden coffin, her face looking tired.

We are, by 80, surrounded by ghosts. Once life was a forest where we could hide, now there are only a few trees still standing. We are aware our own time is limited. We are exposed. The underbrush is thin. When I was quite young I was more worried about being “old” than about Death – old people seemed, to me, bitter and unhappy. My mother said “we make our own old age – what we are when we are younger is what we shall be when we are old”. (Sadly she died at 82 of depression – after my father's death I never again heard her wonderfully hearty laugh).

Let's take up two of the most brutal facts of old age. One is sex. Each of us will deal with this in a different way. I remember talking with Allen Ginsberg about my sense of sexual isolation – I have never been able to have a sexual relationship with someone who didn't find me attractive, even if that was through the haze of too many drinks at the local bar. I remember so many years ago, when I was new to the bar scene. I was in a Hollywood bar and saw a fellow I thought very handsome – I asked someone his age and was told he was 26. I said “I hope I'm still good looking when I'm that old”. The years pass, 26 can be seen in the rear view mirror, but there are always younger men looking for someone a bit older, perhaps a father figure. But no one is looking for a grand father figure. The “up side” of this – at least for me – is that the sexual drive drops off, and what had been an imperative in my teens and twenties, then a kind of habit in my thirties and forties, is increasingly a wistful memory. No one is going to make a pass at me. And while I can still – very occasionally – masturbate, it is no longer a routine thing, of waking up in the morning with a stiff cock, masturbating as a kind of habit. (Funny, when I was young no one ever talked about this topic – it was forbidden – but now it is a matter for routine comedy).

I was lucky in never having had to pay for sex and I do not know much of that world. I do wonder if old men with trophy wives do not feel a trifle embarrassed at having left behind the mother of their children in exchange for a sexual child of their own.

There is one clear truth about sex, which is that nature, which has no consciousness, but which has an iron will, is determined to pass the sperm down from one generation to another, and that this will happen between the age of late adolescence to early adulthood. After that, nature has no further use for us. While we are busy, in our fifties and sixties, making money, making art, making war, hopefully helping to see our children secure, and generally feeling very important, nature couldn't care less about what we do. We have served that singular purpose, of passing on the sperm. And in the case of those of us who, by our natures, are not biologically helpful creatures, nature takes that in stride, allowing room for many errors as long as some sperm makes it through.

Have others wondered, as I do, if all of nature is not, in a way, an effort by God to achieve consciousness?

I have heard all the jokes about the elderly frisking around in retirement homes. There seems to be truth in the jokes. But for me, a sexual life is not in the cards, as I do not find old men of any sexual interest. What is clear to me is that men find it very hard to surrender the notion they are still sexual creatures. There are other things, and by 83 you had damn well better have found them, whether those things are food, wine, art, politics, religion, or gardening, there will not be that driving sexuality we knew as we left childhood and moved into our twenties.

I remember the late Jim Peck, one of the heroes of the pacifist movement, found it very hard to eat a meal unless he was sharing that meal with someone – anyone! I'm content to sit at the table in the restaurant and read a book, or sit alone at home with music. In that I'm very lucky – I find myself good company.

I believe there are people who have a partner with whom they share so much that they are happy to enter old age together. How sexual such pairings are I don't know – but I think it would be wonderful to have someone with whom you can share your thoughts. I'm afraid I long ago blew my chance of that. Not that I didn't give it a try, but I'm too neurotic to make a good partner.

OK, so as you enter old age you are likely to find your sexual drive as diminished as you will find your attractiveness to others has declined – a lucky pairing. There are other aspects to age which we joke about but are not really funny. I admit I am hesitant to breach the topic, since I've never had a scatological bent. I find it almost as humiliating to write about this as it was to experience it, but on perhaps ten occasions my bowels have taken on a mind of their own, I lose control of the sphincter muscles, and a load of loose shit pours out and down my pants. For some reason (thank God for small favors) this has only happened when I was close to home, so there are three or four blocks during which I must pray I meet no friend, and can get safely to my apartment. I know the routine – one undresses, piles the soiled clothing on the bathroom floor, climbs into the shower and washes one's body clean. Then climbs out, put the pants and underwear and socks into the bathtub and fills the tub with hot water as the first stage, later some bleach, some detergent, and then the laundry. It is from occasional events like this that the saying arose "never trust a fart".

Others find little control over their bladder – often men who have had prostate

operations. The late Rob Tucker, a man of invariable good cheer, wore diapers for several years before his death. This didn't stop Rob from attending every Socialist Party convention, nor having me out for dinner with his wife, when I was visiting Philadelphia. One moral here for the elderly, never pass a bathroom without thinking twice!

Our bodies betray us long before death. I have a friend in San Francisco, older than me, and somewhat crippled from a nerve disease which has reduced her to a walker. But her spirit is not confined. On my last trip to San Francisco she did a better job of walking with her rocker than I did on my own two legs.

One thing I can guarantee – sometime between 65 and 75 you will be walking down the street and suddenly find yourself face down on the pavement, with bystanders asking if you need help, if you are hurt. One of the things that goes with age is loss of balance. There are things you can do for this – I take Tai Chi and it has been over a year since I've found myself flat on my face. You will find it harder to open jars. You will find it harder to lift things. Your strength, which was once that of ten, is now more like the strength of one who is only ten. I've learned that when you are old you can count on doing one thing a day. With luck two. A haircut and perhaps the laundry – and that will be it. You can't finish an essay like this after the laundry and the haircut.

There are a few tips I can pass on. Decades ago, in the disreputably glorious bar, the Tropic Village in Ocean Park, a friend told me that the best remedy for an upset stomach was ten or fifteen drops of essence of peppermint in a glass of water. I never travel without it. Of course, since one can't patent this, you must find a chemist's shop which carries such generic remedies. If you are smoking, unless it is really worth the risk, you should give it up. One reason I have emphysema is that I didn't stop smoking until 1975. There are routine exercises you can do to increase muscle strength. It is useful to have a circle of friends that includes at least some who are younger. I have found it very helpful to know an osteopath for bone and muscle problems.

You can also judge how old you are by whether you realize that you are looking for the escalator or elevator in stores. My old friend, Roget Lockard, who used to live in the building where I am now, remembers how he used to run up the stairs to his apt. on the sixth floor. Now he, and I, (and you, in due time) walk down any set of stairs with care, caution, one hand on the railing.

Perhaps the most important advice is to “roll with the punches”. You will get old and die, but meantime you are here, and here is, most of the time, an exciting place to be. While I do not believe in a personal God (and it doesn't, I think, make much difference whether or not you do), reality is a trip and a half. A dandelion, looked at up close, is bright as a sun. Every dog you meet is a friend – and some cats. The reality – such a simple reality – is that the only place it is possible for us to live is in the here and now. So be here now. Assuming you can still eat the food of your choice, enjoy. And if you can still drink wine (alas, I can't), inhale it as a gift.

As a p.s. to these thoughts, some political notes. In late February I had a fire (cause still unknown – perhaps just an electrical short of some kind) which burned me out of my apt. in which I'd

lived for more than fifty years – by a stroke of good luck there was an apt. vacant on the ground floor of the same building, so I've been able to relocate. The point is that the punches you need to roll with will be unexpected – just sure to come. And my experience of a disaster which wiped out memories of a life time left me with a keen awareness that what for me was exceptional, is a daily event for the people in Syria, or Palestine. So many have lost much more - I hope it leaves me with a bit more sense of human solidarity with the fact of disaster.

To close with a few political points.

All that I've written is simply a view of old age from my point of view. Now, however, I want to take a political look of the past hundred years from the vantage point of age.

There are some things I can understand, even if they bother me. I believe I do understand how the Russian Revolution of 1917, setting out to establish a worker's state, ended up a dictatorship over the workers. It was a tragic evolution but not incomprehensible. And if one judges it fairly, there were some positive things about the experiment. (I do not "leap over" the horrors of Stalinism. Rather than a broad listing of murders, let me take just one among many - the infamous Katyn Massacre of 1940 when as many as 22,000 Polish military officers, police, and intellectuals, who had been captured during the 1939 Soviet invasion of Poland, were methodically executed. A crime, absolutely, but one which had a political motive – Stalin was eager to wipe out any independent political current in Poland. In this sense, it belongs in the category of crimes including the fire bombings carried out by the Allies during the Second World War – criminal, but with a purpose, as distinct from the Holocaust, criminal but also insane).

I am no less bothered by the evolution of Israel from a social democratic society in 1948 – with almost unanimous support from the left – into an apartheid state with a reactionary government and almost unanimous support from the far right in the US, including, ironically, the essentially anti-Semitic "Christian Zionists". Still, if one judges it fairly, it is not as wicked as its enemies insist.

But there are four cases of events within the past hundred years where what stands out (to me) were the utter folly of the actions, even as the actions managed to achieve broad support. The First World War made no sense. Viewed from the rubble of European civilization at war's end, it would have been better if one side or the other had simply surrendered rather than marching off to war. It was a war which directly laid the basis for the rise of Hitler, made possible the Russian Revolution, and perhaps made inevitable World War II. Of course there were economic, cultural, and geographic reasons for the war, but not even taken together do they justify the war. One does not have to be a pacifist to know that this war, which helped lay the basis for the contemporary pacifist movement, absolutely cannot be justified – yet it commanded enormous public support, both here and in Europe. It was a war to which American intellectuals vied with one another to see who could give it the most fervent, uncritical support. I refer to two books – there are many, but these two do the job – to give us a look at the prelude to the war and the incredible support it had, even as the trench wars degenerated into mass murder. Try Guns of August, by Barbara Tuchman and To End All War by Adam Hochschild.

Second, was the rise of Hitler. Even taking into account the dreadful inflation, and the pain of reparations, Germany was a model of a civilized nation, the home of Bach, Beethoven, well educated, deeply Christian (and without the stain of anti-Semitism – something Hitler had to cultivate before it could become a major force). It was a nation with a powerful Left (split, it is true, between the Communists and Socialists, but still a great power). And then in a short period of time, from January, 1933, when Hitler assumed power, to September of 1934, when that power was consolidated by a national referendum, Germany came under the total control of Adolf Hitler. How was this possible, what magic did Hitler have, that opposition vanished and the German people became willing agents of the attacks on the Jews (and Slavs, Gypsies, etc.), of support for the war, and of the destruction of Germany itself?

The virulent anti-Semitism of the Nazis came in with Hitler – it was not a special characteristic of Germany (one reason why many Jews were slow to leave). From the standpoint of hard reality, Hitler diverted badly needed resources to carry out the slaughter, in the process depriving Germany of a source of labor. While it was impossible that the Germans (or the Poles) were totally unaware of the death camps, the “final solution” was more or less a secret operation, not a source of propaganda. In short, irrational, root and branch. Insanity.

I do not write this from a sense of self-righteousness. The experience of the Vietnam War forced me to re-examine American history, and to note that this country, a free society, not only elected Reagan, Nixon, and George W. Bush, but re-elected each of them. But – and this is a crucial difference – Nixon was forced to resign and the policies of George W. Bush were repudiated. At no point during this time, even with the problems of McCarthy, the subversive lists, loyalty oaths, etc. did the State manage to silence dissent. Nor was that dissent aimed only at the Republicans – it forced Lyndon Baines Johnson to withdraw from plans for a second term.

There are two more events which baffle me because they made no sense at the time, but had wide support. I do not list the Korean War, though it is a war which has never been properly examined. It took place early in the Cold War and in part was a reaction to those tensions. That is not a justification, but it exempts that war from being totally senseless. But with the Vietnam conflict we had a war which was folly on every count. It violated the simple military proposition that the US should avoid a war on the Asian continent (a lesson people thought had been learned after Korea). It was a war where the US had no investments, was not a source of essential raw materials.

A careful, reasoned look at Vietnamese history would have shown that rather than becoming a “stepping stone” for China, from which it would advance relentlessly toward Hawaii, San Francisco, and Greenwich Village, Vietnam was fated to be the “Yugoslavia” of the Far East, the stumbling block to China.

It was a war which started somewhat accidentally, with the sending of advisors by John F. Kennedy (a good introduction to that period is Graham Greene’s novel, *The Quiet American*). By the time of LBJ it became a war foisted on Congress and the American people by the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution – a resolution which lacked any justification in actual events. (Only two senators dared to vote against it).

The war cost the lives of perhaps three million Vietnamese, and of nearly 60,000 American troops. We are still paying a terrible price in suicides, violence, and broken lives among our veterans. Yet this war had powerful support from “the best and the brightest” until well after the point where it’s folly should have been obvious. Why did Congress assent? Why did the intellectuals largely remain silent? Once the opposition to the war took shape, by the mid-1960’s, it gained support from the academic community and foreign policy experts, as well as from students. But why did it take that long? How could a nation, guided by university graduates, have even begun this criminal insanity? I know there are those who will put forward reasons, but I ask them, looking at Vietnam in the cold light of day, aren’t we left with a profoundly irrational foreign policy decision?

The fourth event which boggles my mind is not Afghanistan (though I think that war was an error from the beginning, but occurred in the haze after 9.11) but Iraq. I hold no brief for Saddam Hussein. I was in Iraq, briefly, just before the first Gulf War. I found the situation oppressive, with huge posters of Saddam everywhere. The lobby of our hotel, the El Rasheed, was thick with secret police. But on the positive side, which may not matter to the neo-conservatives, but certainly mattered to the people living there, electricity worked, the various religious sects, including the Christians, were safe, and with the passage of time, the growth of the class of small merchants, and of the young intellectuals coming out of the universities, there was the virtual certainty change would occur. One has only to look at Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union where enormous changes occurred peacefully under Gorbachev, to see the value of letting time work its will.

The US attack on Iraq could be justified by only one motive – that of hoping to secure control over the oil. But even that doesn’t make good sense – oil is a commodity on the open market, and the cost of the Iraq War proved so very high that we could have met our oil needs far more cheaply buying it than trying to seize it. We destroyed Iraq, which was part of the cradle of Western civilization. We destroyed it without benefit to ourselves or to others. It was a war waged on false premises, to which, however, the media (including the New York Times) gave credence – namely, the charge that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and was seeking yet more. The charge was not true, but even if it had been true, isn’t it a bit odd that the United States, the only nation ever to use nuclear weapons, should feel it was in a position to judge? There were lies – those who doubt me on this can easily check the facts. Our political leaders told us Saddam had kicked out the UN inspectors, when the fact is the US pulled them out. The neo-conservatives, who have never been brought to trial for war crimes, gave us Abu Greib and Guantanamo. And all of this to leave us with an Iraq today where bloody civil conflict occurs almost daily.

To sum up, particularly when the drums of war throb again on the issue of Iran, Syria, or North Korea, where was the media? Where were the leaders in Congress? Where were the foreign policy experts?

I cite these four wars not because I’m against war in general – I am – but because these four defy any rational basis, yet had wide support at the time they were launched. Some wars leave me



with no easy answer. I am a pacifist. I would not have fought in World War II, but I respect those who did, and I do not, even now, so long after the guns have fallen silent, really know what the answer to Hitler was. In that sense World War II was in a different category than World War I. It was a war which opened the door to the madness of a Holocaust which defied logic, which to be examined in the light of Sigmund Freud or Otto Rank and not simply by pacifists and socialists.

It seems to me, as my own time marches on so swiftly, that younger people now should ask the questions others should have asked in the cases I've cited, and to resist, while resistance may still shift which way the river of history flows. The main lesson would be to doubt the leaders. As Bertolt Brecht wrote, "when the leaders speak of peace, the common folk know that war is coming". In the cases I've listed, the dissenters were right, the "government certified experts" were wrong. There is always more than an even chance that the government is wrong. And almost always a strong chance that those who are most eager for war have never experienced it, and will be far from the front lines when it comes. (Look at the sorry mess of "neo-cons" who supported the Iraq War and press hard for a war against Iran or Syria – they are, with very few exceptions, men and women who have never heard a bullet whistle past their ears, never saw a comrade torn apart by a bomb).

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(Edgeleft.org is the website of David McReynolds, staff member at War Resisters League for nearly forty years, Chair at one point of the War Resisters International, and the Socialist Party's candidate for President in 1980 and 2000. He and the late Barbara Deming are the subjects of Martin Duberman dual biography, [A Saving Remnant](#). Retired, he lives on the lower east side of Manhattan with his two cats. He can be reached at: davidmcreynolds7@gmail.com