

BEWARE THE OLD WOMAN IN THE BACK SEAT

Kendra Smith, age 96

For the makers of Tylenol, hallelujah! It takes 15-20 minutes to seep into my veins and turn the pain in my hip joints into a warm glow. Topical marijuana works well on more surface pain. Pioneers in the West used to grow opium poppies and apply the seeds to tooth-ache sufferers. They are beautiful flowers, and if I knew where to get the seeds I would grow them in my garden. People age differently, but the one thing we all may share is chronic pain. Severe pain is like red hot anger. It is one dimensional; everything else is obliterated. Fortunately, chronic pain is not that; it's more like the drone in Indian music.

When my father was eighty-nine, he had severe pain and his wife tried to persuade the doctor to give him something to ease it. The doctor refused, saying it would be risking addiction. My father lived less than another two years. What's so bad about addiction at eighty-nine?

Hindus refer to death as “dropping the body.” That sounds easy, but I’m afraid it’s not, even for Hindus, yet I’m more or less ready to drop mine. My fear is not of dying. It’s a fear of outliving my remaining daughters. I have lost so many persons I cared about that I can almost say I’m used to it; but the thought of losing another daughter is really unbearable. My Aunt Margaret was one hundred, with mind, vision and hearing intact, when her only son died of a painful cancer. Within weeks, Aunt Margaret died. I don’t want her story to be mine.

My musings on age include happy thoughts. With age, I have acquired more of what Buddhists call *mudita* or sympathetic joy. I can thoroughly enjoy the beauty or wit or talent or gusto or success of others without getting into what Buddhism calls “comparing mind.” It’s a dimension of joy I didn’t know when I was younger, when I was afflicted with feelings of

inferiority or superiority. Now that I'm no longer in any kind of competition, I find so much of this kind of joy all around.

I sense persons in a different way. There is something distinctive in each one in the way scents or shades of color are distinctive yet elude description. Little shifts in mood and circumstance make small alterations but the distinctive patterns remain – like a person's signature, or the recognizable footsteps of family members. I love the distinctive qualities of each daughter, indescribable and unlike anyone else. Greater sensitivity in age to these subtle qualities gives relationships more depth. The beauty of children in my neighborhood, whom I see and hear playing outdoors, is a delight; and yet there is an underlying melancholy, knowing there will be disappointments, hardships, and heartbreak for them as for everyone. Now, because of climate change, I fear worse: societal breakdown in the world these children will inherit.

The colors of nature have a freshness I knew as a child, when time had no meaning; yet I miss the densely star-studded sky I knew as a child on a Michigan farm. Even in the California desert there is too much light pollution for the grandest stellar display.

Lying in the grass when I was three, when time didn't exist, I examined sow bugs and worms and snails closely. It's a little like that again, with the vague timelessness of old age. I attend to bees and butterflies and clouds of midges and whatever wildlife wanders into my garden in the same way. A crow calls from far away when I go out on my deck, and minutes later there are several on my neighbor's roof, awaiting their daily ration of peanuts. It may be illusion but I feel a sort of intimacy with them. Jays and squirrels follow, and the family dog exults in exercising his millennia-old job guarding – or trying to guard – the family's food supply. The deck rail is a little too high for her to snatch the birds or squirrels but it gives her a sense of purpose. This is a daily ritual she and I share.

Flower colors are not only vivid, they are also fragrant. I luxuriate in my senses.

Sorrows of the past fade like old black-and-white snapshots. Beauty remembered is as splendid as beauty in the present. Sometimes I dream memories, even smells. Last night I dreamed the smell of pines from one summer spent in the San Bernardino mountains where I slept under pines. That summer was a month or two after my mother died, but in my dream the sadness of that time was washed away; only dreamy sense memories remain.

I'm lucky to retain my sense of smell. So many old people lose theirs, and I value mine. I'm sure I was a dog in some previous incarnation. When I was a young child, I knew the distinctive odor of each family member, though I didn't have vocabulary for the different scents and still don't. I remember each odor and yet can't describe them. I no longer have such a keen and subtle sense of smell but it's still good. A friend just gave me some lilacs – heavenly – and I smell freesias in my garden while sitting on my deck.

Once, in the fifties, I was stripping the sheets from a bed my visiting father had slept in, and again, in a flood of memory, there was the remembered smell. Feelings evoked were the feelings I had had for my father. Ambivalence. In old age, memories have mellowed. We all suffered so much, and the suffering that once occasioned blame and resentment now seems more like a bond. We were in it together.

I am exceptionally fortunate for someone past mid-nineties. My senses are bright, I'm not yet in a wheelchair, I live in my home with a flower garden, and with very nice people: a small Tibetan family, who look after the house and the yard. They are quite willing to do small things for me and I suppose they will do more when I need more. I don't have to worry about money, which enabled me to invite them to live with me rent free. It's mutual benefit.

My mind: As I find I have to get someone to open a jar for me now and then, so also I find my mind losing its grip. My mind floats dreamily rather than fastening onto something. It's not the useful tool it once was. Short term memory is no longer reliable. Once I took great pride in my memory – so good for passing exams and for recording interviews with clients, word for word. Now I'm pleased if I remember what I did yesterday; post-its are essential.

Learning new things is nearly impossible. Like every other human being “in the sere and yellow leaf,” I can’t retrieve names and other nouns when I want to and sometimes I’m left open-mouthed in mid-sentence, gaping like a fish out of water, unable to finish a sentence because the words won’t come. The odd thing is that names of persons I thought I had forgotten, names of people I knew many, many decades ago and never knew well, have a way of popping up in my mind. Flotsam and jetsam? Like carp plopping up in Little Pond where we lived in Massachusetts? What else was in that pond? The pond really wasn’t so little – we boated and swam in it, the children ice skated and people fished through holes in the ice. Neighbors used to throw old sewing machines and typewriters and all kinds of stuff into the pond. I’ve been throwing all kinds of stuff into my mind for ninety six years and it’s all in there, somewhere.

I won’t speculate how aging is different for men than for women, only that for both there is a loss of identity, and I suppose the identity is different. For some women the loss of beauty and sexual attractiveness is a narcissistic blow, but for me; “beautiful woman” was never my identity. Loss of sexual craving has been more liberating than not. Male companionship is enjoyable but I don’t long for a relationship. My husband had a long physical and mental decline and I confess that widowhood has been liberating. Taking care of me is quite enough.

Stereotypes of old people persist, and they have always been more negative for old women than for old men. It was women who were burned as witches when the crops failed and

the Black Death ravaged. Today, when the economy goes sour, the statistics for domestic abuse balloon. I can't rule out the possibility of my own projections, but I think I run smack into a stereotype of complaining old women with male physicians, some of them anyway. I think particularly of a male psychiatrist with whom I made an appointment when I feared my dementia-ridden husband would blow through our savings. I had been warned by a financial advisor that at the rate he was disposing of money, we would be broke in five years. I was distraught, in a panic, thinking I might need a psychiatrist's diagnosis of *non compos mentis* to get control of our finances. The psychiatrist looked bored, started an anamnesis beginning with my childhood, and appeared to be settling in for a long, lucrative therapeutic relationship with a complaining old woman. To be so unmet was like being alone in empty outer space. I surmised that his relationship with his mother was bad. A friend who knew him socially confirmed that yes, his relationship with his mother was rotten.

Psychotherapists think of transference, projection, and resistance. Do they ever wonder how a patient is assessing *them*?

It is not only men who have negative stereotypes of old women. I well remember that when I was younger I couldn't imagine any woman with middle-aged spread or wattles under her chin to have had an interesting life or any interesting conversation. Sometimes, when I am confronted with some young woman (or man) who obviously sees me through a negative stereotype, I have fun pricking the bubble. I remember one evening when a van load of acquaintances were going to some event and a young woman was added to the group. It was very plain she was disappointed to be placed in the back seat with me, an old woman. She leaned forward, straining to hear the conversation of a man and a woman younger than I was seated in the front seat. She answered monosyllabically without looking at me, when I asked a few polite

questions. Learning that she had been in Japan studying Zen Buddhism for her dissertation, I said, “Eiheiji Monastery? Is the Roshi who speaks fluent English still there?” She started with surprise and swiveled around to *look* at me.

I dread the loss of persons I care about and I don’t look forward to dependency. Despite a thread of melancholy running through my memories and apprehension for the future of those I love, I have never, ever been happier. My financial advisor said, “You don’t spend much money.” It’s true. I have what I need; an affectionate, wonderful family, friends, community, physical comforts, a garden, books, music, companionship, even the companionship of a family dog. I haven’t traveled to all the places I would have liked to go – but I’ve had enough for one lifetime. Almost. Maybe I will persuade my Spanish-speaking daughter to accompany me to Oaxaca. But more likely not. It wouldn’t be fair to my daughter if, like a Spartan warrior, I were to return *on* my shield, not behind it.