

## TIME WILL TELL

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Well it finally happened -- I got old.

I had a birthday that told me I could no longer deny the cold hard truth. 60 may be the new 50 but 70 is a different matter altogether. No matter how I feel or how I see myself, facts are facts: time to face the music – time to get real- and to begin to think about what this means, what the future might hold, and how I will cope with the inevitable changes to come.

While I often plan my daily activities exhaustively, planning for the future is not something I have done for a very long time. I tend not to look too far down the road. Most of the time I've kind of let life just happen to me. I guess that's because the last time I made life plans they were cruelly thwarted by forces beyond my control. I was around 12 years old, the year my dad died. My whole family's circumstances and trajectory changed of course, but school was where everything really fell apart for me. I'd always struggled, especially with math, but with the dawn of algebra my troubles became insurmountable. Suddenly my plans that had included someday going to college and becoming a veterinarian were blown away in a puff of smoke with nothing to take their place. I began a downward spiral. Then with a move from the country to the city and to a much larger school the emotional impact of both those losses was compounded. I found myself lost in a vast sea of strangers and it was clear for the first time that I really did not fit in anywhere, that something was terribly wrong.

My fears were not unfounded: not going to college meant the loss of a meaningful career and some semblance of normalcy and stability. Not being able to learn to drive kept me tethered to a small world when I would have preferred a rural life or being able to travel

I didn't live on my own until I was 39 years old. I've worked from time to time and finally managed to get the hang of independent living and I am finally going to college now – art school, my other love, besides animals. Luckily I always had family or friends to help me, to turn to in emergencies. But it's been a day to day, hand to mouth, sort of life.

And that's going to have to change because, in a way, this getting older thing IS an emergency. It's just harder to see, like a glacier slowly grinding boulders into dust. It's inevitable that sooner or later, things will change, big things – a crisis of health or home – and decisions will have to be made about where and how I will live and what

my life will be like. For one thing my siblings both live in other states, but they and the other people I depend on now might not even be around when these changes occur. I don't have any kids. No one HAS to help me!

There are charities and agencies of course but If I don't want strangers making decisions for me I had better start taking control of my own life and future and start deciding some things for myself.

I'm doing pretty well overall right at the moment. Health wise, I have some chronic health issues but, knock on wood, nothing too disabling – though that could change in a flash if one of them flared up again. Financially though, things are pretty shaky. I could not survive on just my Social Security. Between having to buy health insurance (Medicare Supplement) and with rent and other expenses relentlessly creeping up, my income long ago fell short of my expenses. I depend on several government programs – fuel assistance, Section 8, food stamps, etc. to make ends meet. But like a wooden tower game, if any one of them got pulled away, it would be catastrophic. And many of these helps are in potential jeopardy in our current political climate, causing much stress and worry. Then there are life's surprises: a sick pet, a broken computer, a hurricane.

I'm sure we were all happy to discover “senior discounts” and are not unwilling to take an offered seat on the bus – it's true there are some perks of getting older - but it's not all roses.

I certainly never expected that when I turned 65 I'd LOSE a benefit I'd been depending on for 20 years – Medicaid (aka Mass Health). Suddenly I was moved from the disabled category to the senior category and was no longer eligible for that benefit. I guess that was the first inkling that the perks of aging were sort of like the wildflowers in a minefield.

But, enough with the “negative waves”!

Like I said earlier, getting older is not all bad! For people who have worked and looked forward to retirement there are things to enjoy – travel perhaps, putting in shop or garden or art studio, volunteering for a cause. People with kids and grandkids can enjoy their family's growth and accomplishments. People with skills and special interests can be proud of their growing knowledge and expertise.

And just living this long, having learned how to make the best of what we had (or didn't have) to work with, we have a perspective on who we are, what we are capable of, and what's important in life that we didn't have when we were younger.

Growing up and getting started on life's journey, probably took most of us longer than average. Our lives have been adventures to say the least. Most of us were diagnosed as older adults, already having experienced life with its mountainous, disorienting, often traumatic, even tragic ups and downs.

We've blundered and often failed, but hopefully also found our way or even triumphed at times. There is wreckage for sure, but that is true for all human beings – nobody is perfect. Along with shouldering our failures, we should give ourselves credit! We did the best we could to surmount our personal challenges and navigate the pressures and responsibilities of school, work, home, family. We coped as best we could with the loneliness of being on the "wrong planet" with its mysterious and incongruous inhabitants. And even though those challenges were huge, even more difficult to bear was the burden of always being in the dark. With no one there to show us the way, we were blazing trails in the wilderness. It wasn't just that we didn't get the big picture of what was going on around us or where we fitted in, but something even more basic was missing: Not knowing how to think about and appreciate ourselves. Not knowing who WE were. Not knowing it was OK to be who we were.

I know when I was younger, it was as if the different parts of myself were pulling me in different, irreconcilable directions. My life was a process of finding which keys fit which locks. A process of opening doors and closing some too.

For me, one of the biggest, most positive things occurred when I got my Autism Spectrum Diagnosis in 2001. Getting that diagnosis was key to finding some stability in my life.

And only with stability can one begin to find peace and clarity.

I've managed to cut through a lot of the anxiety and stress and the feeling of being at the mercy of everything around me that long ago crippled my identity, my self-confidence and my self-respect – and even contributed to stress related illnesses. With this new knowledge and support it became possible to begin to build a life for myself and to become a solid, grounded, capable, active, self-aware person. Learning about the difficulties of people on the spectrum and how to find solutions and alternatives, but also seeing our unique gifts and strengths for the first time and learning how to put them to good use. Finding our voices. Speaking up for ourselves and for each other.

After living the greater part of my life in the dark, I can now see that there was a common though unseen thread running through the fabric of my life. I'm no longer at internal odds with myself. My different parts DO fit together. It is a joy to finally have a sense of completeness - and a purpose! I am finally accomplishing some of the things I once hoped to do. All these things give me faith in my ability to deal with what lies ahead.

**And just in time...we'll need all these special abilities and understanding to cope with the challenges of aging.**

**I've always resented the image of a puzzle piece for Autism - as if we were not complete in and of ourselves. But "On the Spectrum" or not, everyone has to "fit in" to some extent and work on relating to others. And if there's one thing that is true about getting older – it's that we're going to need help from other people.**

**At the same time, unfortunately, we may find that our circle of people is shrinking by leaps and often shocking bounds. One doesn't get old in a vacuum. My support network is also aging. Friends, relatives and neighbors, people are getting sick, changing, moving, dying. Losing both my part-time employer of 30 years and my Mom in the same year was really tough.**

**When someone is really old - my mom was 99 ½ – you feel like they will live forever. So losing her seemed to come from out of the blue and the loss was huge. We had gotten closer and closer over the years, and talked long distance nearly every day. Then she began to need a little more help, and then a lot more help. As the sibling with the most free time, I was called upon to relocate, and became the primary caregiver to the point of exhaustion and even strain on the relationships between all of us at times. Things got more or less resolved towards the end, but it was painful.**

**Looking back, I think it was part of the tearing away that happens to everyone at life's crossroads, whenever such a deep connections must change or come to an end. And so our family dynamic changed again. Thankfully I have a stronger connection now to my sister than I ever had before. But not having that special, primal connection and underpinning a parent provides, is still very distressing. For a while I was the caretaker of my mom's cat, but she too died recently and I was very sad to lose that last living connection to my Mom.**

**A lot of the trauma of aging relates to loss. Losing people is one of the big and tough things that happens. Most of us have already or soon will lose our parents. Possibly our siblings and others whose lives are intimately entwined with ours. Like Pets. But there are diminishment besides death. Losses like illness, mobility, memory. Including our own - our own health and abilities. Losses like jobs that come to an end, or the end of some other activity that we found meaningful. Losses like having to downsize or move. Losses like having to give up on things we hoped for in our lives, to do or to be.**

**I appreciate more and more that time and people's lives are finite. Knowing that time is limited has inspired me to work even harder to try and fulfill some of my life ambitions while I still can. Being more alone than ever before, I'm often lonely and**

struggling more with depression. But I've had to accept responsibility for my decisions to connect or not with others. There are choices to be made.

Those years I spent caring for my Mom certainly gave me a starkly realistic view of what aging can be like. But I'm finding there are some positive things too. For instance I'm now using the little checklists and reminders I made for her – for myself: “take your pills” “drink more water” “go get some fresh air and exercise.” Because I know how important these good habits and simple acts actually are and what the payoff will be down the road.

If I were to guess what the secret was to my Mom's long life, I'd say it was because she exercised. Body and Mind. For the last 25 years she walked or went to exercise classes several times a week. She also did many things with other people and exercised her mind with scrabble partners, reading and book clubs, art classes, and when invited, went to concerts and museums. She went to church when she was able and until the very end volunteered in programs helping others. She had to force herself to do many of these things (I'm pretty sure both my parents were on the Spectrum) but she made the effort. In fact, she puts me to shame - I don't make nearly as much of an effort as I should on socializing, volunteering or staying in shape.

Right now I live in my own, nice apartment and things look pretty stable. But I still feel like it could all change in an instant. Mainly I worry that my landlord might decide to sell the house. Where would I go? Could I find a place I can afford? I have a ton of belongings, books, art supplies, collections – stuff and more stuff. Would I have to give up the things that make my life my own? How would I even move if I had to? Who would help me? What about my Pets. Would I lose connections I want or need? Or are there other questions I don't even know to ask?

My older sister is always asking if I'm signed up on waiting lists at senior or disabled housing facilities – just in case. That's something I know I should do, but I've been reluctant to consider living in that type of environment because of the close quarters with other people, and also because I wouldn't have nearly as much space. The thought of having to dramatically downsize is very upsetting, and I dread the loss of privacy and control over my life, and just the plain exhaustion I might feel in a community oriented environment.

This summer I visited my sister who has a retirement home in the Catskill mountains. She also has a little house she rents out on the edge of her property. I could move there – Section 8 would allow renting from a family member since I am disabled – but not being able to drive I would be even more cut off and dependent on my sister being there, and I'd be without all the structures and relationships that I've built up here

over the years : friends, school, church, doctors, AANE ! I'd have to start all over again. And it still wouldn't solve the problem of ill health or decreased mobility should that arise which is not unlikely. I'd have to find a solution there where options are even fewer, And if my sister were no longer there... then what? It seemed like a good idea on the surface, but No - I need to stay here. Nevertheless It was good that I considered the possibility because I now realize where I belong, where home is.

So I've looked into a few places and I'm going to sign up for a couple of them – most have long waiting lists – years in some cases. And last week I went to the local Senior Center and signed up for services. I'm tired of Lugging heavy bags on multiple buses and they have a bus that takes people shopping. I can use that when it's really hot or when it's cold and slippery out. They have other activities I might want to try at some point. For one thing, they have exercise classes...

And I'm also sorting through my stuff. Organizing, deciding, selling or donating many of my things. Accepting that I probably won't ever use this or that thing. Doing some deep cleaning. Getting my studio to a place where I can really work professionally on my art – my only option for extra funds. I've also made some decisions to let go of bigger things than things.

I've been paring down my plans and my dreams. What's realistic. What's do-able. What's possible. This week I started another year of college. Will I ever take the train to Colorado to visit my brother? Probably. Will I ever go on that hiking trip to Ireland ? I'm not saying "No" yet.

Time will tell.

