

Journey of a Wounded Healer

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25. Tenacious and Adaptive

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Having spent seven weeks in the hospital, I used a good deal of my free time—time not in therapy, that is—talking with other patients and learning what I could from their experiences. My fellow patients ranged in age from twenty-eight to eighty-eight and came from a variety of backgrounds. Whether from an accident, surgery, or a stroke, we all experienced brain damage and its concomitant debilitations to various degrees. Some complained and cursed their fates, but most were brave and worked to their utmost to get better.

What I became aware of in every case was our frailty, even among the younger patients. Things could go wrong very quickly with one's health and the results were often very drastic—life-changing, in fact. Life is tenacious and adaptive, and these were our saving graces. But when I looked at my fellow patients from young to very old, I realized I was a witness to the whole process of aging, illness, and death. There were those whose wrinkled skin, sagging flesh, and frail bones told me what my future state would be should God or circumstance determine that I would be here a while longer. There were those who cooperated with their nurses to get better and those who resisted every suggestion. Some fought encroaching death tooth and nail and others who accepted, even welcomed it, not in a spirit of defeat but in an attitude of acceptance, of embracing what was inevitable anyhow. I hope I can be as calm and dignified about my own further decrepitude and eventual death as a few of these patients have been. I admired them and told them so, letting them know that the power of their examples had not been wasted on me.

I was also blessed to have known relatives back to my great-grandparents whose lessons of remaining interested in life and loving others deeply I continue to emulate. I have enjoyed every age I have been, including the present one, my seventh decade. While this is not exactly what I had expected would be my reaction to life's vicissitudes, it was one for which I was prepared. I had seen it often enough among my relations and friends. Each age brings its own challenges and rewards unlike any of the others. One may not be able to walk as quickly as formerly, but then there is less reason to hurry. One may not be as beautiful or fit as formerly, but then there is less cause to be concerned with one's appearance. I see this as less a debility than a kind of liberty, a gradual departure from this life and its concerns.

I look at people in their twenties and thirties and I think they look unfinished, that their faces do not yet bear the marks of distinction and character. It is too bad that our culture so mindlessly epitomizes youth when it is but one landing on a staircase of varying height and difficulty. I do, in fact, want to be each age that I have been, and to experience them deeply and fully. It is part of my education as a human being. I do not want to be twenty again any more

than I want to be required to take a class over. I had no regrets and it was time to move forward. And if it is God's plan for me—or whoever pays out and jiggles the strings of fate—I look forward to reaching my tenth decade, meanwhile doing my best to prepare myself to appreciate whatever it might hold in store for me.