

Covid-19 Made Me Old

By Doris H. Goldstein

Women are not supposed to look old. The cosmetic industry invents a constant barrage of 'anti-aging' creams, lotions and strategies to combat the inevitable lines and sags that can march across the face for those who continue to accumulate years and decades. Current new styles emphasize lots of spandex to expose every ripple from head to toe. TV ads are replete with beautiful, agile young women in revealing swim suits or short skirts, flowing long hair and perfect white teeth even when they are hawking medicine for constipation. When a more mature woman appears it is to sell a walk-in bathtub, memory enhancement pills or a retirement village that looks like Disney World. Aging female movie stars who wish to continue to work endure surgeries, starvation and a bevy of makeup artists so that a viewer will comment, "Wow, she must be really 'up there' and she looks terrific." A supreme compliment when seeing an old friend after a long time is:

"You haven't changed a bit."

On the other hand, a man with greying temples or a neat, white beard is deemed sexy and appealing. He is not stuffed like a sausage into a shirt a size too small. His suit jacket or sweater can hide a developing paunch. The fine lines around his eyes or furrowed brow gives him an aura of gravitas and authority. Opting for a completely bald head is another acceptable strategy to hide a diminishing hair line that in its own way seems youthful.

Society rarely celebrates a woman who 'looks her age' while a grandfather type man is depicted as wise and dignified.

I have never felt old in spite of the fact that my birthdate and the mirror tells me otherwise. When I notice another dark spot on my neck or feel a twinge in my knee it is hard not to recognize that my body is showing some wear and tear. Those few extra pounds around the middle and the flabby upper arms are more telltale signals. I know my hair would be quite grey if I didn't color it because my eyebrows are white and have almost disappeared. My former night-owl schedule of a 12:30 bedtime has been replaced by weariness much earlier and a less than solid night's sleep. Having to repeat my birthdate to make a doctor's appointment or fill a prescription is yet another reminder but it just rolls off my tongue as if I was reciting the ABC's. Sometimes a clerk mentally does the math and looks at me quizzically.

Given all of the above, I still didn't feel OLD.

I have been blessed with a loving partner for a little over six decades, three adult children, nine grandchildren and at the moment, four great grandchildren. I am the last remaining of four siblings which leaves an unfillable space in my heart. Although I have also lost my parents, aunts and uncles I still have connections with my remaining cousins who keep me connected to my past. Even without a single best friend, I enjoy a wide circle of friends and acquaintances.

With my husband, I have traveled to every continent and the major cities and destinations in Europe, Asia, South America, the U.S. and the Middle East. Along the way, we have acquired an overflowing basket of memories in addition to sometimes acquiring new friends. I never stop being grateful for these opportunities that the majority of my fellow citizens will never have.

I have had and still enjoy numerous activities and personal pursuits. I have led communal organizations, still contribute in ways large and small to many others and tried to live up to the responsibilities of citizenship. I always have a book to read; usually non-fiction as it helps me explore personalities and cultures very different from my own. Planting a seed or bulb and seeing it flourish gives me great satisfaction which enables me to observe and enjoy the wonders of the natural world. This leads me to do my part in not adding to the trashing of the environment while supporting local and national conservation efforts. I have an abiding attachment to my religious faith which gives me the means to transcend the everyday and glimpse what I think are eternal truths which will survive me.

I am sometimes saddened by the realization that whatever knowledge, wisdom and understanding of the world I and those around me have gained will evaporate without a simulacrum when we close our eyes for the last time. The next generation will spend their lifetime in the same pursuit and the endless cycle will repeat. Everyone is Sisyphus.

But my calendar age was unimportant.....that is until the early spring of 2020 when Covid-19 invaded my life and lives all over the world.

Early reports of the problems in the city of Wuhan were somewhat alarming but China is quite distant. During the past decades, there were outbreaks of other diseases given names like Swine Flu, H1N1, and SARS all of which originated in China and were deadly viruses. They infected thousands, killed many and spread throughout the world but

were ultimately contained. Initially, this was merely another Ho/Hum moment that would pass in due time like the others while having little effect on the daily lives of most of us. Science and medical advancements would take care of it.

However, as the weeks flowed into months, the words world-wide pandemic appeared in print and were spoken daily on TV. Public health officials, doctors and researchers scrambled to define its characteristics; how it spreads and what to do about it. The finest minds of the 21st century were stumbling; first recommending one strategy and then another. This was a recondite virus.....never seen before whose mysteries would unravel slowly and still is not completely understood. A vaccine is months and perhaps years in the future. Terrifying statistics of infection and death in locations near and far are reported.

In the midst of the confusion, initially one fact was agreed upon by everyone, “The elderly are the most vulnerable”. Who was elderly? Anyone over 60. Then it hit me.....THEY ARE TALKING ABOUT ME and MOST OF MY FRIENDS. Then the phrase, ‘shelter in place’ came into our vocabulary. We were all to stay home, not venture out except for the most basic necessities...food, medicine... and only then as infrequently as possible, even this was not without a degree of risk.

How long would it last? Would the grocery stores and pharmacies be open and who would be there if everyone was to stay home? Who would deliver the mail or collect the garbage? How would I get the newspaper? All of the bits and pieces of societal foundations of daily life could disappear. Those of us who are the vulnerable ones have long established habits which give us the ability to go from day to day with a degree of certainty. Everything was swept away almost overnight.

I looked at my calendar book. The weeks ahead were full with meetings, appointments, planning sessions for an important program, a trip to our grandson’s college graduationin a word my usual late winter/early spring activities. All cancelled.

Adding to the disruption of everyone’s life by the coronavirus was several weeks of protests in the streets of the country over police violence against people of color. The pent-up anger and frustration felt by this community for decades erupted in spite of the admonitions to not gather in crowds and maintain social distancing. They were joined by marchers from other segments of the country. Another element of disquietude descended upon America.

Now it is mid-July, 2020. The world has changed but Covid-19 has not and rages on, not only for the elderly. Fortunately, essential services have not been canceled through the efforts of those wage earners we rarely noticed before. Health care professionals and those who support them are stretched thin in many places and overwhelmed in others. Commercial activity has been drastically reduced resulting in millions of unemployed. Food banks are trying to feed numbers never seen before. Educational institutions have shuttered and are now desperate to find ways to bring students of all ages back. Huge industries related to travel and leisure are affected and are struggling. In-person cultural life is almost non-existent and the plethora of non-profit organizations are gasping for breath. Normal religious life has ceased....one cannot attend the funeral of a family member or dear friend. Politicians of all stripes huff and puff and make pronouncements, often in direct contradiction to each other.

Every segment of world-wide society continues to try to readjust just to barely function however they can. Nothing is as it was nor will it back anytime soon.

Am I old yet? Maybe. Do I think about getting sick from the virus or something else? Yes. Would there be a hospital bed if I needed it? Don't know. Perhaps I would be denied scarce resources to benefit someone younger. Possible. Would I be alone there without the comfort of loved ones? Probably. When will I be able to be with my out-of-town family again? Sometime in the future. Why do dark thoughts invade my consciousness at unexpected moments? Maybe because I really am old.

NO! NO! I won't allow that. I have several new books to read and seeds to plant. There are friends to support and family activities to follow. I have Zoom meetings to attend and projects to complete. I have a husband to love, meals to prepare and laundry. I will celebrate my next birthday in a few weeks with joy and gratitude and relish where life has taken me. My calendar book may have empty spaces now but at some point that will change. Whenever that happens, I will be ready to resume where I left off.

Covid-19 tried to make me old but I won't let it.

July, 2020

