

Coming Alive

When I was six or so, my grandmother, who lived with us, would entertain me by pinching the skin on the back of her 80-year-old hand and then, letting it go, telling me to count slowly until her skin lay perfectly flat again, like a wave slowly reabsorbed by the sea. I easily counted to 10. Every time.

Then it was my turn. My elastic young skin returned to normal in an instant. Not even enough time to count to one. "You see? That means I...am...old," my grandmother would declare haughtily, pausing between each word for emphasis, as though old was something I should aspire to, with its own privileges and opportunities. To me, at six, old was a game, a foreign land, and of interest, though I couldn't say why.

Earlier this month I attended my college reunion. My 55th. I hesitated before going public with that high number, considered not mentioning it at all, hoping you, reader, would guess maybe...45th? How acculturated I am, especially as a woman, to avoid revealing my age, as though it might disqualify me from...what? Living fully? When, in our sequence of birthdays, do we stop insisting, "No, I am five and three quarters, not just five?" When is it we stop being eager to claim the stature an extra year promises? When, instead, do we start buying into the North American cultural hype that old is the single most undesirable stage of life? As far as I'm concerned, the shucksters have it wrong.

I was invited to offer a session on memoir writing during the reunion weekend. Those who attended, like most everyone in this chapter of life—are grateful, after years of go-go, for time to pause and reflect, whether to record anecdotal family experiences for children and grandchildren to enjoy, to introduce younger generations to who their Dad or grandma really was, to offer a statement of values as shaped by trial and error, or maybe pen a retrospective of a life of adventure. But it's not all about the rearview mirror.

At every reunion, a memorial is held at which the names of those who died since the last gathering, in our case the 50th, are read aloud. Given the number of names, how many we'd lost, this reunion's ceremony was especially sobering, profoundly sad and/but, in the indomitable spirit of our class of '68, was experienced as a call to do good works in the time we have left. That sentiment was discussed in the memoir workshop with all agreeing there are not only memoirs and autobiographies to be written, but also forward-thinking books as our focus sharpens, our appreciation of life intensifies, and the counterintuitive and startling sensation that as we age...we come more alive.

This appetite and energy was underscored by the topics covered by classmates during panel discussions and seminars that filled the reunion schedule. Two sessions on ageing offered get ready, get set solutions to the legal dilemmas and emotional challenges older generations face. "Justice, USA," a new Discovery+ series filmed by classmate Marshall Goldberg was previewed. He stated that "the experience proved to me beyond any doubt that everyone has a great story to tell if given the right chance, and that people behind bars aren't all that different from you or me." The Reverend Anne Fowler, an Episcopal priest, spoke of "Abortion Dialogues," a documentary to be released in October that covers six years of six pro-choice and pro-life

advocates finding, through conversation, mutual respect despite differences. The documentary film is offered as a model for difficult discussions we now face on so many fronts.

"Our time together has changed all our lives and has given me a new sense of what love can mean. And I am left with a glimmer of hope for this fractured country," says Fowler. There was a seminar on AI and another on the new ways of thinking we need to accommodate as Americans. An astronomer and an epidemiologist spoke of their local climate action work. Perspectives on the current challenges in Africa, China and Ukraine/Russia were led by classmates working internationally. Remember, this is the presumed over-the-hill crowd walking these talks. What's behind, what's ahead, good or bad, it's clear this band of college cronies won't be indifferent to either, instead, as long as they are able, will meet both straight on.

My grandmother embraced the status of old as one to revere, to respect. To me now, at 76, old is still a game, a foreign land, and of abiding interest. Every month in this column, I try to articulate why.