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Coming of Age

The number isn't important, friends have been saying when I talk about turning sixty. Some say, age is only a state of mind. Some say, you're as young as you feel. Some say, age doesn't matter.

And some say, why, you look great! which unfortunately confirms that there really are three stages of life: youth, middle-age, and you look great!

Well, my well-intended friends, I am here to tell you that age does matter. In some ways, it matters a LOT.

When older people and younger people talk, they look at each other differently. Younger people have a shorter gaze.

I was taught the meaning of a long gaze by a high school teacher, Miss McCutcheon, who gave me her long teacher's gaze during an English class. I felt like a butterfly, pinned and wriggling. When another student asked what she was seeing, she said simply, "Some day someone is really going to love that boy."

I couldn't handle that. I was fifteen, fat and self-conscious and confused, and I squirmed, turned red and snapped something back ... but have never forgotten what she said. At a time when love seemed beyond my reach, her insight was deeper than mine, living as I did half-blind and half-crazy in an adolescent storm of rain hail and thunder.

Coming up to sixty, we see other people, especially younger ones, more often with that long look. We see who they are and who they can become if they only attend to the better angels of their natures.

Sometimes there are moments during such conversations when it feels as if the years fall away and transparencies of other conversations, ones that happened years ago, meld with the one I am having now. Memories control the present moment, capturing it with a force field of longing and grief before the experience becomes transparent to its

underlying dynamics, the irrevocability of my own past juxtaposed with seemingly innumerable futures for the one to whom I am speaking, branching like blossoms of forbidden opportunity.

Then the regret fades, replaced by encompassing acceptance of the only life we have to live.

We may not know how to say what we know in such a moment, but we do know and we know that we know.

We are no longer innocent, coming to sixty. We know what evils can befall us. We know as Robert Frost said that there are finalities besides the grave. We know ourselves, sometimes too well. We remember too many people we have loved and held as they died. Somehow the degree to which we have lived with passion and gusto informs our awareness of death as well as our love of life.

Two recent movies, *Lost In Translation* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, capture magnificently the poignancy of moments of love and loss, showing connections deep bone-in-the-socket solid for only a moment before the whirlwinds of our lives take us again in different directions.

I love good films the way I loved good books as a child. Coming up to sixty, I accept that being a latchkey kid and losing my parents early gave me a particular destiny. William Gibson, the cyberpunk writer, notes at his web site that many writers share that kind of loss or other early childhood trauma. We find solace in the world of imagination and images, building meaning from the tools at hand. Books and films provide points of reference for sharing insights, giving us a common language.

In another great film, *My Dinner with Andre*, Wallace Shawn and Andre Gregory say that a moment of genuine connection with another person heightens our awareness of being alone, too, and to accept that we're alone is to accept death, because somehow when you're alone you're alone with death.

That's the implicit affirmation when the protagonist of *Eternal Sunshine* says OK. OK. to a doomed trajectory of romantic love. It is also the moment of genius at the end of

Lost in Translation when the director/writer makes the final words whispered by Bill Murray in the ear of his young friend impossible to hear.

It doesn't matter what he said, and it doesn't matter what I say either. We always fail to articulate what we nevertheless unceasingly try to say, the deepest truths we know, which can only be suggested like the moment of waking from a dream more real than the sunlight streaming through the window, when we know we will never remember the dream exactly but nevertheless have another day, another day, another day in which to pursue it.

Coming to sixty does make a difference. It is clear that what we mistook for achievement is empty air, unless it made a real contribution, unless it made a difference, it is clear that mostly self-serving efforts deliver as much satisfaction as drinking from a dribble glass.

Still, we are left with questions, not answers.

Which were the moments of genuine self-transcendence in which I was called to be more than I thought I was and somehow fulfilled the promise? Which did I miss? What is possible in the time left, as eyesight fades but the sharper-eyed inner gaze of an ancient mariner discerns with greater clarity what matters most?

If we are fortunate, the choices we make now, coming to sixty, were determined many years ago when earlier decisions built the karma of our destiny. We all fail, and we all succeed. There is nothing now but the sudden unexpected opportunity, nothing but being ready. There is nothing to hold back, no energy to save for another day.

I know that I am alone with life and death. Even in moments of the deepest communion, I can feel the world turn and the spiraling universe bend away from my embrace. Moments of dizzying lucidity, seeing the anchor of the life given and the life received for what it is, counterweight or ballast, nothing amassed.