

TURNING  
SIXTY-FIVE

(THE  
PROCESSS  
OF AGING  
III)

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13, 21, 35, 50, 65 are not fully arbitrary numbers; they mark the average end of different stages in a person's life. Sixty-five is definitely a new plateau, although a subtle one. As I live through the process, I am sure that aging is a combination of "wear and tear" and of gene development, which is why I look (and behave) more like my mother than my father as I age. Like in child development and in adolescence, but less dramatically, different genes kick off in later years and create alterations. Aging is not simply decline, but substantive changing, due both to internal causes and to external agents, such as accidental damages and the constant pull of gravity.

Starting with my appearance, even before turning fifty I had noticed two vertical wrinkles on either side of my lips, most pronounced upon waking up in the morning. Obviously, the "smiling" lines got intensified from sleeping on my side and trying to squeeze my mouth shut to avoid snoring. By my late 50s, these creases had become longer and deeper, with the flesh hanging like baggies at their bottom, on either side of my chin (worse on my right side). This has been the most dramatic change on my face – and the most annoying, because

it definitely alters my looks and is getting worse and worse. My face keeps sagging all the time, pulled by loosening body fabric, weariness and gravity!

Another disturbing phenomenon also started occurring after fifty: at social gatherings, after I talk to people a lot (even without drinking), the corners of my mouth feel as if they dribble a little saliva, and I feel like wiping them all the time, which I have noticed other older women doing often. This probably is related to a loss of control and general slackening of the lip muscles, perhaps from drooping my mouth under strain – which I do more and more as I age. The dribbling is not a permanent condition, because I do not experience it for long periods (never when I lecture or talk normally), and it must be related to emotional stress – excitement or exhaustion – because I had it again a lot during my trip to S. India last year.

The appearance of my lips has not changed drastically, although they feel drier and more sensitive than in the past, perhaps because I pinch them inwards from tension most of the time (more than ever in the last months or year). The thin lines radiating around my upper lip are barely visible, but they turn into an unsightly puckering when I

talk or eat – although it is hard to see myself in those conditions. Actually, I don't look at my face too closely anymore, as I am getting used to being older. Most people are surprised when they hear that I am 65, yet nobody asks me for an ID when I say I am senior citizen. I almost started to believe my age!

The sags and crinkles under my eyes have gradually increased over the years without becoming real bags yet, and my crow's feet are not too pronounced except when I smile. But I have developed clear puffs on the inner side of my upper lids, and my forehead's wrinkles have much intensified, both the two vertical ones between the brows (conspicuous in my mother) and the wavy horizontal ones higher up (quite distinct in my father). I seem to frown, as well as lift my eyebrows almost constantly, even when I try to relax, which gives my face a grim and harassed expression. This became a permanent condition by 1992, after the death of my two closest friends from cancer (followed by the second fire on our Greek property). The rest of the 90s were also extremely stressful, with my handling of a friend's complex estate, while teaching and doing my art all along. It is said that one's aging face is

shaped by one's own temperament, but life's blows certainly have a hand in it. The imprint of tension has not left my face even though I am reconciled with death, and my life has been much more peaceful and pleasant in the last three years, if still with hard work and pressures – from moving my home and studio, to getting together a book on my public art, to completing one of my largest public commissions, to creating new art for a New York show. Enough campaigns won, but so many things I want to do yet, and time is getting short!

Naturally, my hair has gotten whiter, very gradually. Already in the mid-50s, my temples started graying seriously and a whitish area appeared over my right forehead; but the overall color was still predominantly brown. By the late 50s, white hairs increased on the top of my head too, where later another greying streak developed. Although my hair is still not mouse-grey overall, for the last six or seven years I have been using, every couple of months, a light brown "rinse" to tone down the white. Strangely, my pubic hair is still dark, although I notice a couple more white hairs in it every few years. However, in my mid-50s I realized that I had thinner pubic hair than in my youth. I am not sure when

the change occurred, but it may have been due to menopause or to my uterus removal at age 44. A minor milestone this year: the first white hair on my eyebrows!

The most aged spot of my body is definitely my throat, which was the first unsightly mark of aging. Not being fat, I have no real double chins, but the sagging skin in that area is almost as upsetting, and the stringy tendons sticking out on my neck when I drink or eat are startling. Even the area around my ears has sagged and the ears have gotten larger and more faded. Generally my skin is getting gradually parched all over since my mid-50, starting with my rosy lower arms and especially my hands, the worst disaster area after the throat: aside from crinkly skin (like a snake's!), they also got age spots and prominent veins and tendons. The peculiar thing is that none of those changes are felt by touch. I can only see them, directly or in the mirror.

Surprisingly, my body appears much more youthful than my face and hands, partly because I manage to keep my weight steady (I can still wear clothes from my 20s and 30s), partly because I remain limber enough (with Yoga and constant moving). My belly slumps a bit and tends to get bigger

any time I gain a few pounds; my chest is a little bonier; my thighs have lost their smoothness and roundness; my knees are both wrinklier and knoblier; the flesh on my back and bottom is more limp, with creases under the “cheeks” (as much as I can see). Yet, my breasts are still rather fresh, if a little flatter and saggier the last couple of years; my upper arms are relatively firm; and the outlines of my legs are still nice-looking, especially with stockings (which hide their wrinkly skin and expanded blood vessels).

However, a number of damages are evident in my bone structure. I never had a great posture, frankly, even as a youth – I slouched from shyness and was never athletic. But in my mid-50s I definitely started developing a hunch that I first perceived in videos of me during inspections of my Philadelphia park. As I grow older (and probably have some osteoporosis), I realize how difficult it is to keep one’s back straight. I do not quite have a “dowager’s hump” yet (no crease or lump on the back of my neck) but it may be getting there, much as I am fighting it with Yoga. Another bone problem is my bunions, which have gotten very prominent and occasionally painful in the last years. This is a hereditary condition (all the women on

my maternal side had it), aggravated by the huge amount of standing I do in my work. My large toes are turning inward, not quite riding over the other toes, as some old people’s do, but I keep them under control by not wearing anymore high heel shoes with narrow points, and by massaging open my toes every night, as Yoga teaches. Moreover, since my mid-50s, my toenails started changing in shape and in the way they grow: they developed a tendency to get ingrown at the corners, as many old people’s do, in spite of my wider shoes. (But they have not become harder or brittle.)

A more insidious problem has been a permanent crack in the cartilage of my left ankle (transchondral talar-dome fracture), which happened during a fall in 1992. The damage has not progressed and pain attacks are rare, but I have to walk carefully, especially on uneven ground, and avoid running, jumping or jarring my ankle, for fear of making it worse. As a result, I have stopped aerobics and dancing, and I often tread gingerly like an elderly person (especially on icy ground or slippery steps), to prevent falling. Other damages that I got from falls and an automobile accident (a dislocated elbow, a torn shoulder ligament, painful back, etc.) have healed with time. My

knee joints may have slight arthritis, but I have no problem going up numerous steps and hardly lose my breath (less than much younger people anyway). However, small accumulated damages, like two stiff toes broken years ago on the right foot, the left ankle crack, and a pulled muscle tendon now and then, here and there, make my Yoga performance uneven. It is a constant struggle to keep limber at this age! On the positive side, I was able to learn the head-stand posture after my mid-50s, and my swimming and skin diving improved every summer in Greece in the past decade. And of course I can still walk quite fast on normal ground.

After turning fifty, I started complaining about getting stiffness and aches quite often, particularly with cold weather. My legs get especially stiff after long sitting, like in airplanes or movies, or even during sleep, although this has improved in the last years, perhaps because I bought a soft mattress. However, recently – upon nearing 65? – I think my muscles have gotten less flexible, especially in the thighs. Their tendons feel like taut ropes and get injured if I force them to overstretch. On a different level, in the past five years, my fingers feel clunkier and less able of meticulous tasks. I

have a hard time tying small knots, handling my necklace clasps and buttoning small buttons. This lack of muscle coordination for precision improves when I put my glasses on, even when the necklace has to be fastened behind my neck -- which shows that sometimes it ties only psychologically to fuzzy vision.

My eyes have been pretty good for my age. After getting my first prescription for reading glasses at age 51, my eyesight did not change for eight or nine years, even though I was complaining at the time of a "quantum leap" downhill: I could hardly read anymore without glasses except in sunshine. However, the situation has deteriorated lately: my eye doctor discovered a cataract in my right eye two years ago and another one starting on my left eye this year. I still can almost read without glasses in bright sunshine and see better at far distances without glasses (e.g., while driving); but I need two pairs of glasses for middle-far and near-far distance, aside from close-up (reading). This fuzziness of vision during daily living is not only annoying, but disorienting. Seeing blurry hardly makes you confident about your environment. I find myself becoming mentally vague, slow and clumsy, and I have some

difficulty interpreting spatial relationships on the ground in front of me, such as curbs or steps within a striped pavement. I have to pay attention where I tread and this makes my walking hesitant, from anxiety of tripping or slipping. Strangely, I am as good as ever going uphill or up steps, even without glasses.

My hearing, which was never particularly acute, has also deteriorated during the past 4-5 years. In my last term of teaching (1997), I noticed that I could hear the students less during group discussion. Although it is true that younger generations tend to mumble and seem unwilling to raise their voices or enunciate clearly, I noticed that I started having more speech comprehension problems with TV too. This has gotten somewhat worse the last couple of years, but what got really bad is the loss of distant sound: I cannot carry on a conversation with another person from any place in the house beyond the next room. The ear doctor who examined me recently detected a normal amount of loss, especially for high pitch sounds (I sometimes do not hear my wristwatch alarm or the phone when I am outside). But I know the loss is for normal sounds too at a distance (even though my husband insists that we

cannot converse between rooms because our house is full of electric machine noises). And I am sure that I have trouble particularly with speech discrimination rather than simple sound intensity: I hear more than I want to the background music on TV -- I just miss a lot of the words! (To my defense, it is true that present actors articulate less clearly in order to be more realistic, and TV directors make background music almost louder than the speech, to appeal to youngsters.)

Three things that have not changed at all are my voice (still clear and youthful), my sense of smell (more acute than ever -- Elizabeth's was too, until her death), and my sense of taste. I not only enjoy more fully good food, but my wine connoisseurship is developing with age (and practice). There have to be some compensations against the nuisances of aging!

My sexual drive was clearly reduced already in my mid-50s, or rather became less consistent. I attribute the changes and fluctuations partly to the extreme emotional stresses and inhuman amount of work that I have been undergoing during the past decade (particularly caring for Elizabeth since her fall in Greece in 1989). But there is no question that sexual desire quiets down with age, and

mine also gets cooled off by the present exaggerated promotion of sex in all media – from fashion to porno films (with general exploitation of the female body). I have not photographed my vagina since my 30s, but it must be more shrunken. It feels generally drier, more sunken, with the lips less fleshy. I was horrified to see Elizabeth's vagina in her 80<sup>th</sup> year: it looked like a hollow crater. In contrast, one's rectal hole gets like a wrinkly sack pulled down by gravity (mine a little, Elizabeth's a lot). This may actually be due to hemorrhoids that lots of people develop with age from constipation and standing. Fortunately mine are the bubble (not the itchy) kind. I keep them under control by spreading *Preparation H* cream on the bubble and gently teasing it back inside my bottom, because it becomes more irritated and painful by hanging out.

A more disturbing sign of age is the loosening of the sphincter muscles, both for holding gas and urine. Upon approaching sixty, I already was losing some control, because, more often than earlier, I could feel bits of gas or urine escaping when I coughed or sneezed with force. (I also think that after 60 the intestines produce more gas – for me regularly after lunch – which may be what generated the

expression “an old fart”!) This problem, which is periodic rather than permanent, got particularly aggravated during a touch of bronchitis and pneumonia that I contracted in Florida some four years ago: with the deep coughing I was doing for several weeks, I was often releasing bits of urine (or gas). On top of being as sick as I ever remember in my life, this kind of incontinence felt really debilitating and worrisome, although it normally never happens without a strong sneeze or cough (or laughter bout), when the diaphragm is abruptly pushed downwards, and only with a full bladder. I was one of those children who sometimes pee in bed until age four or five (because I remember my shame when it occurred), so I suppose I have a tendency for incontinence. In old age we return to the weaknesses of childhood!

During the last five years, several mental changes have occurred too. I sometimes am slower in formulating my ideas in speech, and have occasional lapses of memory for specific words – which is more upsetting. For instance, a number of times I could not remember the English word for amber (only the Greek one) and once or twice I could not remember strange attractor – words very familiar

to me. Worse still, my mind is shifting so from one subject to another that I often start to say something to my husband, and by the time I get his attention (or he can get closer to hear me!), I have totally forgotten what I wanted to say. All these memory problems may be due to the fact that I am stuffing my brain with so much new information (e.g., quantum cosmology or computer skills), that older information gets harder to recall – or totally eliminated. Also, with sabbatical and fellowships we moved so much, living every three or four years in a totally new environment (and for me it is a real trauma to organize my complex work outside of my studio and home), encountering a new set of people; not to mention all my public art commissions and our other travels, especially in unfamiliar countries, such as China, Japan and Turkey. Moreover, three years ago we moved permanently, buying two new buildings in Washington, selling our Oberlin and Greece houses, and reorganizing totally our life. (Strangely, I have almost perfect recall of all the items I relocated in my new house and studio.) I think that the mental or memory lapses I experience may not be the effect of aging, but rather of excessive overuse of the mind. Brain cells may

be renewed independently of age, yet I am not sure they can keep up with the amount of change that life undergoes in our times. It may prove difficult even for the young.

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