

Unfaithful

by Deborah Grassman
Founder and CEO of Opus Peace

Have you cheated yourself out of the real experience of growing older?

“Oh, wow!”

According to his sister, and reported in the *New York Times*, those were the words Steve Jobs exclaimed just before he died.

Is it possible to discover that “Wow!” earlier in life? Could aging connect to that “Wow!”, offering something we need? Have we gotten too arrogant or controlling to realize that aging has something to teach us? Why do we fail to trust the aging process or fail to trust ourselves to navigate aging?

“It takes a lot of courage to grow old,” my 90-year-old mother often said the last few decades of her life. Rather than cultivating courage, however, most of us *resist* aging, cheating ourselves of the opportunity to learn from experience.

“We’re all going to die,” we say without allowing that truth to plumb the depths of our souls where its mysteries are revealed.

I have been fortunate. As a nurse practitioner, I’ve cared for more than 10,000 dying people over my 30-year hospice career. These patients have been my teachers. They have taught me things I could learn nowhere else. They have taught me the secrets of “dying healed,” a concept that seems oxymoronic in an “anti-aging” culture.

When given a terminal diagnosis, a person’s perspective shifts dramatically. Some people wilt with fear and dread. Others use terminal illness as an opportunity to grow. “Cancer was the best thing that ever happened,” some have said. “It woke me up. Now I know what’s important and what’s not.”

Whether someone wilts or awakens, the realization is the same: “My life matters.” That’s the paradoxical truth that death bears, and the earlier we realize that, the sooner we can “live healed.”

As we age, the threat of death grows stronger. We can use that threat to awaken an interior “I matter” vitality, accessing eternal wisdoms not found in the material world. The transformation begins with opening up to the reality of death. As one patient told me: “Now, while I’m dying, is no time to be lying to myself.” And in the space of just a few days, he mounted the courage to open up to the peace that waited beyond his fears. His wife said she had never seen him so “happy and peaceful.”

Another patient jubilantly told me, “I’m packed up, prayed up and ready to go!” He died a week later, and I could only marvel at his wisdom, letting it inspire me to do my own inner work so one day I, too, could be jubilantly “ready to go.”

In a society that is afraid of loss, aging and death seem like a poison we are forced to drink.

Is it possible for it to be a *healing* poison? For that to be true, we have to stop asking superficial questions that keep us clinging to who we used to be — questions like:

Which facelift procedure should I use?

How can I maintain my power and authority?

What love-object do I need to find?

How can I stay fixated on who I used to be?

Carl Jung challenges us to not “content ourselves with inadequate or wrong answers to the questions of life.” Yet, we do just that — we allow modern advertising to dictate who we are rather than allowing our own imprinted destiny to unfold with grace and dignity.

Viktor Frankl also provides insight: “Today’s society is characterized by achievement orientation, and consequently it adores people who are successful and happy, and, in particular, it adores the young.”

We allow money and temporary materialism to take us away from the eternity in our soul. “Buy our product so you don’t have to be you” is the prevailing message. We incorporate this into our self-image, which is an archetypal form of prostitution: We sell our current-aged self and buy a younger version of ourselves, losing our self in the process.

If we can stop being unfaithful to ourselves, then we begin to trust the part of ourselves that already knows how to age without fear and trepidation. To do that, we have to be willing to discover and embrace our interior elder. (See sidebar for my personal encounter with her.)

Aging humbles us. Humility helps us ask tough questions that can only be answered beyond our ego-self, questions like:

Why am I ashamed of the age I am, realizing that it is part of who I am?

Why have I let commercials brainwash and control how I feel about myself?

Am I willing to discover my NOW life (which includes the age I am NOW)?

How might grieving my losses help me let go of who I was so I can embrace who I am?

How might acknowledging my fear of death grow me into my larger self?

Each of us is beckoned to redeem the destiny we were born to fulfill. Initially, we *protest* that destiny; then we *resist* it. We start trying to *control* it. At some point, however, most people come to *accept* it. The truly wise even learn how to *consent* to it. But some are even more than wise — they are liberated in that “Wow!” moment. Their secret? They actually *trust* their destiny.

“Now, while I’m dying, is no time to be lying to myself.”



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Choosing to Honor Your Soul's Elder



I have made it a point to meet my Interior Elder so that I am less afraid of her. I have even grown to trust her. Here's a letter my internal Elder wrote me a few years ago when I retired from one career and was starting a new non-profit organization that addresses "soul injury"®. I needed guidance, and I knew she could help. Here's what she said:

Dear Deborah,

I first met you 61 years ago. I was so far away that you could barely see me, yet I was in every beat of that tiny little heart that so bravely decided to come into this world to meet me.

You are no longer so far away. As I have called your name with the lub-dub of each heartbeat, you have drawn closer. You sit at my knees now. I long to gaze fully into your eyes, but sometimes you turn your gaze away from my loving arms that await your return to my bosom — a buxom bosom that yearns to hold you and nourish you with breasts filled with the milk of life.

Each day, you are looking more and more like me. You don't like that do you? You are ashamed of me. You didn't think I knew that did you? Well, I do, and it hurts each time you hide me or curse me when you look in the mirror or groan with the ache in your bones.

Deborah, I am the destiny you were born to fulfill. Do not be afraid of me. Do not be ashamed of me. Every time you say you are "lucky" that you don't have gray hair, you are turning me away. Whether you know it or not, you need me, and when I come to the hairs of your very head, I hope you won't cover me up or color me away, but that you will REJOICE and wear me proudly. If you will do that, I can hold you even more tenderly than I already am. Yes, you do have wrinkles. This should be no surprise to you. Yet, you act surprised to see them each and every day. When you pull the loose skin up from the sides of your face to erase the grooves I've so lovingly placed there, you make me feel very sad. Not for me, but for you. You see, Deborah, you lose your power when you do that. Yes. You are running away from the very thing that gives you your strength and wisdom.

Deborah, it was I who carried you through treacherous days. It was I who cradled you during the night and gave you dreams to guide your way back home. Deborah, it was I who stood strong by your heart to assure that it would not become crusted over with bitterness.

Deborah, you have launched an organization to respond to the Soul Injuries that haunt our broken world. Deborah, I have a secret to tell you about that. You are not its CEO ... I AM! So, call on me when you are scared, weary or faint of heart.

Welcome home! It's about time that you finally acknowledged me as your roommate.

With love,
Your Soul's Crone ♦