

# THOUGHTS AND VERSES ON AGING

In the crisp days of my youth whenever I was asked what I thought about growing older, I always responded with a nervous but brassy rejoinder that hid my profound belief that I never expected to live past 28. Tears would fill my eyes and bathe my face when I thought of dying before my son reached puberty.

I was 36 before I realized I had lived years beyond my deadline and needed to revise my thinking about an early death. I would live to see my son an adult and myself at the half-century mark. With that realization life waxed sweeter. Old acquaintances became friendships, and new clever acquaintances showed themselves more interesting. Old loves burdened with memories of disappointments and betrayals packed up and left town, leaving no forwarding addresses, and new loves came calling.

I decided I would consent to living to an old and venerable age. White strands of hair would combine to make a startling snow-white narrow streak emerging near my temple. I would speak more slowly, choosing my words with the deliberation of an elder

stateswoman, a Madame de Staël or a Mary McLeod Bethune. I would wear lovely floral scents – lavender and lilac – reminiscent of lace handkerchiefs and old-fashioned sachets.

My clothes would gradually become more distinguished-looking: gray suits, with good brooches on the lapels, and elegant dresses. And while I would refuse on pain of death to wear old ladies' comforts, I would give away the three-inch spike heels that had given me the advantage of being taller than nearly everyone else in the world. And I would choose good shoes with medium heels save for the odd gold or silver pumps for black-tie affairs.

Those were my plans. Oh, yes, I would keep company with the other old



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women who would be friends equally dolled-up, and I would always have an elegant, dapper man holding my arm.

Those were my plans, but Robert Burns was right: "The best laid schemes...." Mine certainly went awfully a-gley.

At 60 my body, which had never displayed a mind of its own, turned obstreperous, opinionated and deliberately treacherous. The skin on my thighs became a lumpy, my waist thickened, and my breasts – it's better not to mention them at all except to say that they seem to be in a race to see which could be first to reach my knees.

Doubt and pessimism came to me in a terrible Siamese-twin embrace:

*The loss of love and youth and fire came raiding, riding a horde of plunderers on one caparisoned steed, sucking up the sun drops, trampling the green shoots of my carefully planted years.*

*The evidence: thickened waist and leathery thighs, which triumph over my fallen insouciance.*

*After 55 the arena has changed. I must enlist new warriors. My resistance, once natural as raised voices, importunes in the dark. Is this battle worth the candle? Is this war worth the wage?*

*May I not greet age without a grouse, allowing the truly young to own the stage?*

*But now, as I wend nearer to my 70th year, my optimism has returned.*

*My appetites have also returned with ravenous lustiness. True, I can't eat choucroute garnie or fried chicken with potato salad and then head for bed. I eat smaller portions earlier and try to take a short walk. A smooth scotch still causes me to smile, and a decent wine is received with gratitude. Men and music still bring great delight, of course, sometimes in moderation.*

Mostly, what I have learned so far about aging, despite the creakiness of one's bones and the cragginess of one's once-silken skin, is this: do it. By all means, do it.

## WAKE'S QUEEN WELCOMES NEW KING



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*Dr. Maya Angelou greets Dr. Nathan Hatch on Oct. 18, 2005, in the sanctuary of Union Baptist Church. Angelou had just taken part in one of several programs held that week to welcome Hatch as the new president of Wake Forest University, a school where Angelou has taught for more than two decades. Hundreds attended the event at Union, where Angelou wished the new president Godspeed.*