

Distilled Spirit

October, 2012

Toastmaster Speech #4, How To Say It

I turned 64 years old this month, but on the inside, I still feel like the same Sandy that I've always been.

I'm still 3 years old and in awe of rainbows and things that sparkle, like spider webs glistening in the sunlight.

I'm still 10 and love getting lost in the imaginary world of a good story in a book or a play or a movie.

I'm still 16 and very interested in understanding all the different ways that we human beings experience our lives.

On the inside, I'm the same me looking out at the world, with new layers continually added on, but nothing really going away.

One of my professors in graduate school told us that he didn't really feel any different than he ever had. He just noticed that they kept letting people into college younger every year!

I often think of this, looking at policemen and doctors and people running the world who seem so shiny and vivid to me. It's not that I'm getting older - it's that the rest of the world is getting so *young*!

This also works in reverse. When I was a teenager in the '60's, I was a huge fan of Joan Baez and saw her perform many times.

Then a few years ago, when my husband and I went to a Joan Baez concert at UC Berkeley, we walked into Zellerbach Hall and my first reaction was - "Are we at the right place?" How come all these *old* people are here? Where are all the people *my* age?

...Until I realized that all these people probably *were* about my age; in fact, most of them were probably at least 10 years younger! Déjà vu, disrupted!

Looking out at the world, the kaleidoscope keeps turning, and all the shapes and colors come together in new patterns that are endlessly fascinating and amazing and beautiful in whole new ways...

For me, getting older is mostly very positive.

I no longer think very much about the things that were painful for me when I was growing up. That's all become old news, long since accepted or resolved.

I don't have to wonder what I'll be when I grow up, whether I'll get through school and be able to support myself. I found a calling that is completely fulfilling for me and that pays well enough.

I don't have to be anxious anymore about whether anyone will ever love me, whether I'll have kids, whether they'll turn out okay. That's all happened already.

And I've gotten used to dealing with who I am, the advantages and the disadvantages of my ways of being.

My skin may be more wrinkled, but it's much easier to live inside it these days.

I don't even mind the wrinkles so much. I think of my Granny's old face and how beautiful it was to me. She took all the challenges and hardships and disappointments of her life and forged them into soft lines of compassion and humor and wisdom in her face – which was much more beautiful to me than the smooth skin she had when she was young.

Maybe you can see what I see in her picture here.



If I live long enough, I hope to become as beautiful as my Granny someday.

But the thing I love best about growing older is that I feel like the world relates to me more and more the way I experience myself – as a spirit who happens to inhabit this body.

When I was a young woman, I often felt like the world saw me as a body that happened to have a spirit in it. And this never felt good to me.

I love it now that when I'm out doing things in the world and people are especially helpful or friendly or interested in talking with me, I can take this very *personally*.

It isn't about sex or anything else they want from me. I don't have to have my guard up. I can play with them with an open heart, and this is so much more *fun*.

I'm sure I won't like it so much if my body starts getting old enough to really interfere with the expression of my spirit, if I get too uncomfortable to enjoy connecting with the world around me.

But I think about what a friend of mine once said about how hard it was dealing with his kids when they were teenagers. He said, "I guess adolescence is God's way of getting us ready to let them go. If they were still those cute little kids we used to have, we'd never want them to leave home!"

So maybe it's the same with old age. It prepares us and the people who love us to let us go. I used to be so afraid of losing my Granny when I was a kid. But by the time she died, when she was 94 years old, I knew she wanted to go and I was ready to release her.

These days, growing old seems to me like distilling the spirit, becoming a more and more condensed form of who I really am.

The vessel I inhabit is oxidizing away, but what remains feels like a clearer and more pure essence of me, less clouded by the fears and other obstructions that used to get in the way of my ability to connect in the world. And this makes me happy.

Let me close with an excerpt from a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

"For age is opportunity no less
Than youth itself, though in another dress,
And as the evening twilight fades away
The sky is filled with stars, invisible by day."