

TO BE WHAT YOU MIGHT HAVE BEEN

Rev. Amy Carol Webb

Darwin published *The Origin of the Species* at age 50. Colonel Sanders started Kentucky Fried Chicken with his first Social Security check. Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote the first of her *Little House on the Prairie* series at age 65. Alfred Hitchcock made seven of his most famous movies, including *Psycho* – all between his 54th and 61st birthdays. Mark Twain published *Huckleberry Finn* at 49. Cezanne did his greatest work in his 60's. Then there's Anna Mary Robertson Moses -- Grandma Moses to you and me -- who had her first New York art exhibit at the age of 74. Florida's own Marjorie Stoneman Douglas -- wrote "River of Grass" at age 57, then started her historic fight to save our precious Everglades at 78 -- and was still an environmental activist at 100 years old. And one of my favorites -- the great abolitionist and women's rights advocate, Sojourner Truth -- became the traveling preacher we remember at the age of 53. Some might call these "late bloomers."

Another so-called "Late Bloomer" is the great Japanese poet, Toyo Shibata -- who published her first book of poetry at 99 years of age, entitled, "Don't Lose Heart". It includes such poems as "Everyone is Equally Free to Dream" and "Don't Try Too Hard." In Japan, poetry anthologies rarely sell over 10,000 copies. Hers has sold 1.5 million.

"Late bloomer" was originally a horticultural term applied to plants that blossom late in their life cycle. Now we use it to refer to people who find their niche, their passion, their voice or vocation later in *their* life cycles, and so seem to "arrive" later than their peers. It can also refer to folks who change course in life to follow their deepest dream.

The term itself, according to Merriam Webster, comes of -- "late: coming or remaining after the due, usual, or proper time", and "bloom: reaching full competence or maturity." Taken together, then, a "late bloomer" is a person deemed to have reached full competence or maturity *after the due, usual or proper time.*"

I've got a problem with that. We tend to have such fixed notions about the time-line of success, and by what yardstick that success should be measured. And we have equally fixed notions of what constitutes maturity and competence.

So just what exactly *is* the "due and proper" time one should reach "maturity and competence"? Who decides that?

First, the time-line of success. We live in a culture here on the North American Continent that worships youth. That's a fact and we'll not likely change it -- that's a big boat to turn that will take generations.

Remember, we were all young at some time. Young and exuberant, young and hopeful, young and energetic, young and full of ideas, young and full of spit and vinegar. And ... some of us, young and foolish. I'm glad to say some of us have actually outlived our own notions of what constitutes "old". Today, I stand before you and humbly admit that I did have a poster on my wall in high school that said -- "Don't trust anyone over 30."

And then I passed 30. Awhile ago.

But it's not only the supposed time-line of blooming I call into question, but also the limits of creativity and competence placed on us not only by society, but by ourselves. Even we say to ourselves, I'm too old for that, or it's too late.

And we've really got to cut that out. Because it's just not true. In the New Yorker magazine recently I spotted a review of a study by a University of Chicago economist named David Galenson, entitled, "Old Masters and Young Geniuses" -- a fascinating exploration of the correlations of human creativity and age. In this study, Galen discovered that younger folks tend to be more *product* oriented in their creative lives, while older folks tend to be more *process* oriented. That is to say, young geniuses are "finders" while old masters are "seekers." Young creators tend to be results-oriented, while old masters tend to be more open-ended in their approach to life and learning.

Closely associated with this are scientific studies that increasingly show that intelligence, inventiveness and ingenuity are not so much linked with brains that are younger or larger -- but with brains that are more flexible!

I believe this bodes well for us as Unitarian Universalists! Think about it -- what calls for a flexible mind more than our fourth principle -- our commitment to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning!? Or the one that follows it -- our fifth principle committed to democratic process! And to me this means commitment to our search for truth and meaning and democratic process both as individuals and as a community.

Because I believe that whatever lies behind us, what lies *ahead* of us is more than we've yet been able to imagine! I believe that we each yet have the seeds of dreams within us, seeds just waiting for the right conditions to bloom.

Now, by right conditions, I don't mean to give us any excuses. It's way too easy to stir up a case of the "if only's". You know what I mean. When we say to ourselves, "I'd try this, if only ..." "I'd have been that, if only ..." "I'd would done such and so, if only ..." "I'd take that trip, climb that mountain, ford that stream, follow that rainbow, sing that music, write that book, *Be that me ... if only ...*"

Let me tell you what my Great-Grandma Jones had to say about that. My Great-Grandma Jones who eloped with Grandpa because she was half Native American and he was white and their love was illegal -- and they headed for Arkansas while it was yet only a Territory and turned dust into a cotton farm. If anyone within her earshot got into the "if only's" on any subject, she'd shake her head and say, "Well then, that's like sayin' 'if we had any ham we'd have ham and eggs if we had any eggs.'" There's no "if." Only "do."

That seed inside you yearning to bloom is not waiting for right conditions, not waiting for the perfect time, the easy time, the convenient time - the "if only" time. That seed inside you waits only for you to dare.

That seed inside you waits only for you to dare to bloom -- because, in the words of the author George Eliot -- whom we know as Mary Ann Evans, a 19th-century English Unitarian: *It's never too late to be what you might have been.*

Whatever dreams we may have thought we left behind, it is never too late to follow those dreams. Okay, so, yes, I can hear you arguing, "But I wanted to be an Olympic long-distance

runner and now my body won't do that anymore." Wait, that was my own head talking. And that's correct. It's not likely I can be an Olympic long-distance runner after this many years fighting gravity, but I can still decide to get up tomorrow morning and be the best runner – okay, *walker* – I can be now.

But who among us has dreamed of being a painter, a singer, a writer, a dancer, a teacher, a philosopher, a scientist? Who wanted to learn carpentry or plumbing or electrical circuitry or book-binding or print-making or quilting or – you name it – it's *your* dream?

Look as hard as you want – you won't find an expiration stamp anywhere on your person. You are not like some can of beans or a carton of milk. There no "best if used by" date on your heart.

Remember all the people we've talked about this morning who found themselves and their life's work after 40, 50, 60, 70 years – Darwin, Twain, Cezanne, Grandma Moses, Sojourner Truth, Marjorie Stoneman Douglas -- all the way to Toyo Shibata with her first book of poetry at 99 years old! Are these individuals any more remarkable creatures than you and I? I don't think so! They are no different from you and me, yet at some point each of them just decided to finally answer the call of their hearts! And so can you. And so can I.

And so can we.

The Unitarian Universalist Association has passed 50 itself. Today we find our movement is poised on the threshold of a new era of growth, of deepening, of both the wisdom of maturity and the exuberance of youth. Or not. Our movement is ready to reach beyond. Beyond congregations to a call to mission, to be the voice of liberal religion in the 21st century, to take our message of hope and justice to a world in upheaval, ready to be what it yearns to be in concert with who you and I yearn to be. And we can be all that -- together – in this place and in this time.

This time. *This* time for us – for *this* Unitarian Universalist faith, for *this* congregation to be all it has ever dreamed of being – that vital, thriving, singing, dancing, joyous justice-working, peace-making, out-reaching and in-gathering fellowship of people determined to heal this world one broken heart at a time! It's time for for you to bloom, and for me to bloom and for us to bloom together like never before. It's *never* too late to be what we might have been!

And it's not too early either! In the same way we must tell old masters they're too old, we must also must never tell the young geniuses that they're too young! They, too, stand at the ready to redeem our suffering world.

So, yes, I once had that poster on my wall that said, "Dont' trust anyone over 30."

I have a different one now. It says, "I'm just getting; started!"

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