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Becoming an Old Woman (in the West) (from Dirt and the Good Life)

Lisa Graham McMinn

George Fox University, lmcminn@georgefox.edu

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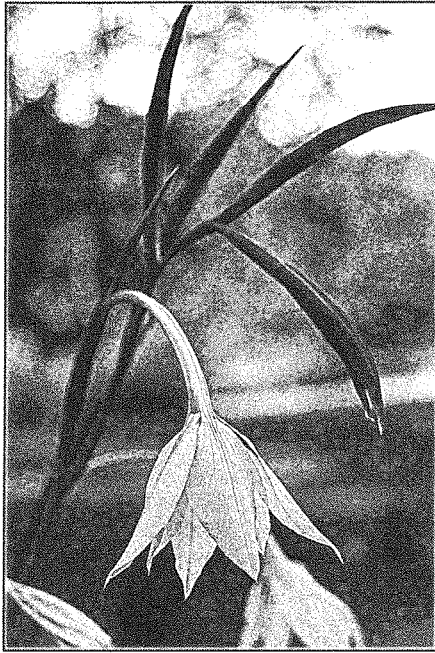


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Becoming an Old Woman (in the West)

I turned 53 this summer. To anyone over, say, 63, that will sound young enough. To those younger than about 43, I will seem old-ish, and I'll be so old to those under 20 that the nice ones will treat me with gentle kindness for fear that I might break and the rest will see me as irrelevant and/or invisible.

This may not be true, but it reflects one of my fears.

The year I turned 40 a student told me she looked forward to 40 and streaks of gray in her hair because people would take her more seriously and the angst of being young would feel less angsty. Wise words from a 19-year-old.

For my birthday Mark took me to an adventure park in the forest near Haag Lake where one gets harnessed in and then climbs into trees and then sways, crawls, swings, and zips from tree to tree through an ever increasingly challeng-

ing and higher-off-the-ground ropes course. It felt good to know I had the upper body strength to accomplish each task, however aware we were that most folks—well, all others actually—were a good bit younger than us.

On my birthday card Mark wrote: *I love how this year has demonstrated again your lifelong love for learning. Your pottery is amazing* [note: not yet, but I hold out hope], *your desire for a cow amusing, and your tattoo—well, never mind.*

So there, it's out there. I may want a cow to milk someday, which Mark isn't sure about, and I'm getting a tattoo in two weeks, which Mark sort of hates. I've wanted one for about 20 years now, so it is not an impulsive grasp at youth. The tattoo will be over my right shoulder blade, a botanical drawing of a fern—three fronds, one still unfurling. Ferns have been a significant symbol to me for nearly as long as I've wanted a tattoo. I resonate with the way a fern, in order to grow, must unfurl and open itself to whatever comes. Whatever comes will include sun, rain, hot, and cold, but also the possibility of being nibbled or broken. The fern reminds me that I need to do the same. I need to release my hold on myself, open my hands to whatever God permits to come my way and embrace its impact on me as part of who I am to become.

Growing old requires a fair bit of that, especially as a woman living in the Western Hemisphere. In addition to feeling as though people took me more seriously, once I turned 40 I felt I could graciously back out of the competition to be beautiful in a young sort of way. I still obsessed about my weight and my clothes adequately enough to consider myself a good Western woman, but some of the angst surrounding that eased.

But 53 even feels old-ish to me. So I need to stay open to the broken fronds that increasingly become part of “maturing.” And most of all, I need to accept changing roles rather than fight them. So yes, some of my students will see me as so old they can’t imagine I have anything to teach them, but a lot of them are willing to hold off judgment a week or two to see if I can hold their attention. And increasingly students and other idealistic young souls wanting to learn how to live a life more connected to God’s earth volunteer to come dig in the dirt with us. They think we have something to teach them, and maybe we do.

So I’m grateful for life—every day of it. Some days have been painful, most rather ordinary, and a good many wonderfully extraordinary. What a gift to have made it to 53! I think of friends who have not—Bill who drowned the summer after we graduated from high school, Margaret Rose who died too young of cancer at 42—so many I could name.

My friend Marcile, who is about 20 years my senior, said her 50s were a great decade. So far I have experienced them similarly. So much goodness! This has been the decade for adding chickens and farming to my life, and granddaughters and shifting roles in my children’s lives, my mothers’ lives. May God give me the grace to accept whatever God allows—the gift of each sun-filled day and the pain of each bruised frond—all of it shaping me still.