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Growing Old (from Dirt and the Good Life)

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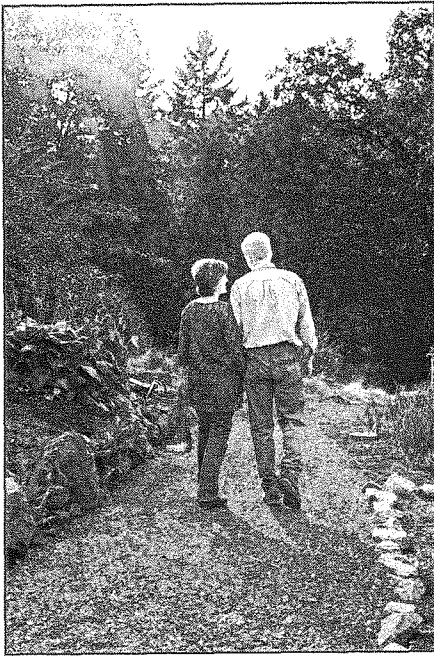


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Growing Old

After a night interrupted a dozen times or so with a sharp sciatica pain, I felt pleased to see the old digital clock approaching 8:00 as I reached my final awakening—much later than our normal rising and only possible on a sabbatical year. Lisa got out of bed first, rustling the sheets on her side of the bed as I said, “Happy anniversary.” Today is our thirty-second. Surprisingly, she didn’t respond. She’s never been the type to offer silence in response to my words—even when annoyed at me—and I couldn’t think of any reason for her to be annoyed anyway. It puzzled me. A moment later I said, “I think that generally receives some sort of reply.” Still nothing. I concluded that her ears are just not what they used to be, even as I admitted to myself that my hearing is worse than hers.

Twenty minutes later, standing in the kitchen, watching the oatmeal cook, I recounted the conversation, expecting

Lisa to feel embarrassed. Instead, she told me her version. She began the morning by saying, “Happy anniversary” as she climbed out of bed. Apparently, I didn’t hear her.

I said, “Happy anniversary,” which she took as a reply. Then a minute later I mumbled something about not getting a reply, which confused her just enough to stay silent. We chuckled, both concluding that my hearing really is worse than hers. The audiologist tells me my hearing isn’t bad enough for a hearing aid yet. Lisa thinks I should get a second opinion. She’s happy to be the one to offer it.

There are, more or less, three good things about growing old (which pale a bit in comparison to the list of good things about being young, but they are still good to remember). One is that growing old beats the alternative: dying. Two is that some people, sometimes, take you more seriously when you’re old, as if wisdom really does come with age. Three: some of us have the privilege of growing old alongside someone else. This is one of my life’s great blessings and will someday be a blessing recounted in death by one of us.

We were young once—before hearing loss and sciatica and wrinkles and white hair. Those were good years, too, with laughter and friendship and hard work. We raised three daughters together, loving and praying for and sacrificing for them more than they will ever know, though it never felt onerous. We built careers and professional identities, mentored students, worked through some tough times in our marriage. The anniversaries kept rolling around every December, and as some of our friends lost their marriages, we resolved to hold on tighter to ours, to celebrate each passing year as a gift. It’s hard to know which day of which year we suddenly recognized that we are growing old, but it felt abrupt and came too soon.

Here's a conversation we've had several dozen times in the last few years:

Mark: We got old, Lisa. How did it happen?

Lisa: We just kept on living.

And so we have, and we hope to for many more years. And not just living as in passing the days toward a date with death, but living an abundant life. To be sure, there are bulging disks and hearing loss, but the main theme of our growing old is joy and abundance and gratitude to God.

We have spoken on Christian college campuses about hopes and fears of marriage, but what do two people who married when Jimmy Carter was President know about marriage in the twenty-first century? So we've surveyed students before speaking on their campuses and have now collected data from 3,100 students. One of the highest hopes today's college students report for marriage is "growing old with someone." So there we stand at the chapel podium, talking with the barely- and not-even-20-something students in the audience, all of us wanting the same thing, all of us wanting to grow old alongside another. At the end of our survey, we include an open-ended comment box about hopes in marriage. One Wheaton College man responded this way:

Kisses and lingerie and carrying my wife;
laughing a lot, enjoying life together, encouraging
one another, waking up beside each other,
not being alone at night, memorizing Psalms
together, teaching piano lessons, raising a family,
visiting grandkids, visiting friends and family,
hiking in mountains, cuddling up by the fire,
someone to worship at church with, someone
to serve and give everything I have to, someone's
feet I can rub, someone to pray with, someone
to cry with and carry each other's burdens
in a safe committed relationship.

When speaking at Wheaton, Lisa and I read this quote in chapel on a Monday and had calls and e-mails all week from women who wanted to meet this guy. We patiently reminded each inquirer that the survey was anonymous; we didn't know who provided such a lovely quote about marriage. One woman didn't give up—she asked us to read her name in chapel on Friday so this anonymous guy would know she wanted to meet him.

Another Wheaton woman wrote on her questionnaire: "I am hoping that, in approximately 53 years, we'll still like each other enough to start smoking cigars together on the porch every night (because, seriously, by that age, who cares about lung cancer?)." She may be wrong about when people give up caring about cancer, but she is right about wanting 53 years or more with one's partner.

This aging together that Lisa and I know is what young people yearn for. We all want the privilege of living long enough to joke about hearing loss. We all want a thirty-second anniversary, and then a fifty-third. Those of us who encounter such a thing are deeply blessed.