

On Aging

by Norma Dunning

I was born shy. At birth I assume that I never wanted to open my eyes and look into the faces of my parents. My mother has told me stories of how I was colicky for my first six months of breathing. She would put me to bed with the vacuum cleaner running next to my crib. To this day any humming sound lulls me to sleep.

My shyness meant I never liked my birthday. My mother would invite all the kids who lived on our street in various Canadian cities. Northern cities. The ones that no one ever vacations in. My mom would bake a cake and hide nickels and quarters and pennies and dimes wrapped in wax paper inside of the two tiers and then grin as she iced it. She would take napkins and fold them into tiny origami bowls and fill them up with little candies. She would get the glass milk bottle and clothes pins and the kitchen chair we each had to kneel on to drop the pins into the bottle. Of course, there was always the classic Pin the Tail on the Donkey and the blindfold waiting on the couch for each of us. Mom loved having all the kids come over. I didn't.

My older sister Laura became the games manager. She would line everyone up and get us organized like tiny soldiers on a mission. She kept track of who won or lost each game, the early indications of her future career as an accountant. We would eat water-logged hotdogs with too much mustard and ketchup. All the while, through all the noise and racket, I would not say one word. I didn't have to. All the other little girls blabbed on and squealed and gushed. I stayed as far away as I could. I watched them from a distance. These little girls with frilly dresses and ringlets were all foreigners to me.

I dreaded having to open gifts. Gift opening meant having to be the centre of attention. Ooh's and ah's from all of them and Laura being far more excited than me. When I was in grade one, I asked her to open everything. From that year onward, I gave her my entire birthday party and all the gifts that came with it. In my early years I dreaded my birthday, but I never and will never dread getting older.

Aging is not about vanity. Aging is not about watching your face slide south with the pull of gravity as time ticks past you. Aging is not about fighting with our bodies. Aging is about being content. Being content in who we are now. Being content in all that we have seen. Being content while watching our grandchildren drive our own children crazy and grinning at it all and thinking, “You had it coming!” The grans are always so much better than the originals. Aging is about letting anger leave us forever. There are so very few things that are worth getting mad at. Who needs to carry around anger? I don’t and won’t. It’s far too heavy.

I have five grandchildren. I love being in their company. I love their energy and curiosity. I love hearing them laugh over the word ‘fart.’ I love how they come and sit on my lap and put their head on my right shoulder. They sit in the stillness, no talking, my fingertips flitting through their hair. I am their safe place in the world. A place where there are no demands or explanations required. A place without expectations.

That is what aging is about. It is about the language of love and warmth we give to the next generation. It’s about being the best *anaanatsiaq* (grandmother). It is about leaving a legacy of love.

My birthday is in early January when everyone is broke and the tail ends of Christmas have not left us alone yet. My birthday arrives on the same day that charge card and utility bills appear. I am the least celebrated human. I don’t mind it.

This year, though, I did something for myself. Two of my grandchildren came over on my birthday eve. I had bought a child’s tea set. I set up the tea set on my coffee table. I loaded a couple plates with chocolates and plantain chips and KD and cucumber and celery and slices of red and orange and yellow peppers. When the children arrived, I announced, in my best British accent, that we were having, “Afternoon tea where we will discuss the events of the day”.

My granddaughter was awestruck. She was thrilled to play afternoon tea. She is the epitome of femininity, so opposite of me. I have caught myself wondering if her parents brought home the wrong baby. When I see her love of nail polish and pretend make up and LOL dolls, I assume it’s some throwback genetic flaw.

My little grandgirl lifted the teapot filled with ginger ale and poured a splash into each cup with reverence. She crooked her pinky into the air when she took her first sip. She declared

she had received a 99% on her grade-one spelling test. We all clapped our hands and declared her a genius and then my grandson picked up an inukshuk from a shelf and asked, “Grandma, what is this?” A question that thrilled me.

I told him that an inukshuk is a place of knowing where ice or open water was, a place where snacks were left for weary travellers, a place of security and knowing that someone had been there before you and survived. I told him that inukshuks have to have legs or they aren’t real and that they are taller than giants! Their anaanatsiaq was thrilled to share a tiny amount of herself with them. Somewhere inside of them is a tiny bit of me.

We went on to play Hide n’ Go Seek, Red light, Green light and Mother May I until we had tired each other out. We had fried chicken for dinner and chocolate birthday cake. Then they had to return home and we kissed and hugged and declared our undying love to each other. It was the best birthday eve.

Aging is about what we do next. Aging is about sharing all we know. Aging is having the next generation bask in our wisdom. Aging is about reinforcing to our grandchildren that even after we have passed away, we are still cheering them on and guiding them on their different paths because they will still feel our fingertips flitting through their hair.