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a time
of living
graciously

REFLECTIONS ON
GROWING OLDER

BRIGID LOWRY



FREMANTLE PRESS

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A BEGINNING



It has been said by some famous dude that the biggest mystery is that we don't think we are going to die. The other mystery, entangled with the first, is that we don't think that we are going to get old either. We know it, of course, theoretically. Then, little by little it begins to happen.

Our body starts gradually, or not so gradually, decaying. Our hair goes grey. Our sight and our hearing begin to fade. We go to more funerals. We contemplate our own funeral, a surreal imagined event that we shan't be attending in our current form. We read about someone described as elderly in the newspaper and think: yikes, I'm older than them. Once it was easy to get up off the floor, now it is not. As one friend said, it's like a Mack truck bearing down; or, as another remarked, here it is, our time of general decrepitude.

So, old and getting older, like it or not.

The next bit is equally shocking.

Death. For sure. For real. Zen teacher David Radin puts it so beautifully: *Each one of us will one day experience a day that has no tomorrow.*

Do we like it, the truth of our own ageing and the nearing of our death? Mainly, we do not. We ignore it. We joke

about it. We may pretend acceptance but underneath, for most of us, lies a curious mixture of fear, anxiety, and the vulnerability of the unknown.

Personally, I was hoping to have it more sorted by now. I was hoping to have come to terms with my hair, my restlessness, and my anxiety. I'd planned to learn Spanish and spend more time in Samoa.

I've done none of the above and my time is running out.

Although if I live to the same age as my grandmother, who died when she was 101, I'm going to be old for a very long time. This does not appeal. Already my knee is so sore that the idea of surgery has begun to sound attractive.

I'm twice divorced, with no sign of my imaginary soulmate, the funny one who's interested in what interests me: Buddhism, food, and people, in no particular order. So it's not old age I am facing but doing it alone. Again, yikes!

And how will it be, dying? I don't want to be like the woman in the first episode of *Six Feet Under* who eats her dinner alone while doing a crossword, then chokes to death and isn't found for a very long time. I'd prefer to be the person who slips away peacefully in my sleep, sometime in the future, while still in command of my faculties. Or if not, to have an elegant not-terrifically-

painful disease that gives me time to say goodbye to my beloveds and find good homes for my possessions.

When I drive past a cemetery I wonder how long until my turn, and please can I have the slip-away-peacefully-in-the-night option, not one of the scarier ones involving agony or a loss of dignity.

Furthermore, will my son remember where I told him to put my ashes? Also, do I want ashes? Might it be best to be wrapped in an old blanket and left to decay in a mix of sawdust and mushroom fibre, a more ecological way to dispose of a body. And where did I put the article that told me all about it and is it even possible to have a natural burial in the state where I live.

Here I am in my house that smells of toast and incense and things I forgot to do, writing about ageing and death. I could have picked an easier topic, but the more I contemplate this one, the more interesting it becomes, so I have begun an exploration that belongs to all of us, one way or another. Would you care to join me?

getting a crappy haircut, or backing into a pole. It has been called Life with a Capital F, and it's like this for everyone, no matter how many pretty pictures they post on Instagram. So we run, hoping to escape feelings of anxiety, boredom, fear, shame, regret. We get lost in angst about the past, and fantasies about the future. We daydream, eat too much cheese, spend ages scrolling the screen or watching mindless rubbish—anything that provides some temporary release. It takes a great willingness to meet the here and now, just as it is, including all the bits we'd much rather not include.

Liberation comes from not excluding anything, including our own pain. The Burmese monk Sayadaw U Tejaniya advises us to not see something as a problem, just see it as it is.

It's important to find a way to peace and stillness in your own heart because the world will never settle down and dance to your command. Now is the only time and here is the only place we can learn to be less emotionally reactive to our own psychological content. To become less tangled in our own mess is a lifetime's work. Suffering is necessary until you realise it is unnecessary, as Eckhart Tolle says.

You may have to say to yourself a thousand times: *No big deal, me. There's no real drama worth the fuss*, but when the truth of this finally kicks in, it will be a wonderful thing.

Some days it will feel too hard, and you will be cross with yourself. You will stare aimlessly into the refrigerator, contemplate shaving your head or living under the bed for a while. At this point you can do what the monk Ajahn Brahm suggests and say to yourself softly, *It's okay, mind. I love you*, then eat a pear, go for a walk, and try again later.