

## True Colors

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It has, so it seems to me, been a particularly and stunningly beautiful autumn here in Hingham and on the South Shore.

Perhaps it is just because I've forgotten that it is this way every year, and so I am surprised once again, every year surprised by how beautiful it is.

Or perhaps there is some meteorological cause – something in the weather. Maybe a positive effect of global warming. Who knows. Well, maybe someone does. But I don't.

In any case, it has been quite lovely. It still is in its late autumn way.

Now, I was probably taught in fourth grade science class the facts of the fall colors we so love; but, if so, for a long while I forgot how it works.

A few years ago I re-learned the mystery of fall colors.

It is actually quite simple.

The colors – yellow and orange anyway – were there all along! They just couldn't compete with the green overlay of chlorophyll, couldn't compete with the life-giving, life-sustaining green process of photosynthesis.

Then, the shorter days of early autumn signal the photosynthesis factories (don't ask me just how) to close down until spring. The green chlorophyll disappears from the leaves and – like an annual magic trick – yellow and orange, having been there all along, emerge from hiding.

Finally – for this time around – the trees will live through late autumn and winter from the stored food of spring and summer.

Red is apparently a slightly different matter (something about trapped glucose) and so too the brown of the oaks (leftover waste we are told by those who know such things).

But for the purposes of sermonic metaphor I want to stick with the “true colors” of yellow and orange: there all along, yet as the light becomes briefer by day and the cold brisker by night, the colors emerging in the leaves near the end of their days.

I want to stick with that metaphor, for it seems to me that it's a pretty good metaphor for us as we enter the proverbial autumns of our lives. For it seems to me that each of us too, like the leaves, becomes – or can become – more like the person we've always been. Each of us may discover that we can show our true (or one might say “deeper” – since the green of summer was authentic too...) colors more freely, increasingly less bound by convention and role.

I'm hardly the first to have thought along these lines, so I will begin by sharing with you a little of my past week's harvest of reflections from a few writers much older than I. (Many from essays collected in *Songs of Experience*, ed. by Fowler and McCutcheon.)

First, recognizing that “showing our true colors” may not always be a good thing, we begin with essayist and food writer M.F.K. Fisher. Never one to mince words, she wrote that her theory was that “there is no such thing as ‘turning into’ a Nasty Old Man or an Old Witch”:

I believe that such people... were born nasty and witch-like, and that by the time they were about five years old they had hidden their rotten bitchiness and lived fairly decent lives until they no longer had to conform to rules of social behavior, and could revert to their original horrid natures.

Well!

Fortunately she does go on to assert that “On the other hand, there are a lot of people who seem to be born merry or serene or very lively...” and as they age “they emerge as bright souls... not nasty... just *good*.”

(It is of course the second sort of person we have among us here at Old Ship!)

Now, I expect we understand that there is truth (perhaps more than we'd like!) in what Fisher says; but I do protest against what sounds like the pure determinism of her assertion – that the kind of old person we will become or that we are is predestined from childhood. Whereas I'd prefer to put it this way: I would prefer to believe that we have the opportunity throughout our lives to shape who we are for the better... so that we will become more of *that* as we age, more not only of who we have been but also of who we have shaped ourselves to become.

Though, naturally enough, there are limits.

Florida Scott-Maxwell, writing when she was in her eighties, named the limits this way:

One is confronted by one's own incorrigibility. I am always saying to myself, 'Look at you, and after a lifetime of trying.' I still have the vices that I have known and struggled with – well, it seems like since birth. Many of them are modified, but not much...

But just the freedom to acknowledge *this* is great, isn't it? We can change... but we can't change everything... and in fact maybe part of the game is just to try to appreciate and enjoy who we are and who we've become, quirks and imperfections and all.

Continuing in this spirit, again Florida Scott-Maxwell:

My kitchen linoleum is so black and shiny that I waltz while I wait for the kettle to boil. This pleasure is for the old who live alone. The others must vanish into their expected role...

Or, as Ram Dass puts it in his book *Still Here: Embracing Aging, Changing, and Dying*, age can free us to be a little eccentric: “We're free to be a little 'dotty,' and free ourselves from conventional behavior.” He wrote this, by the way, following a major stroke from which he did not fully physically recover. And he could also write that this was the happiest time of his life.

Perhaps writer Elizabeth Coatsworth (who has a Hingham history as many of you know, having lived here in the 1920s and in 1948 having written her lovely book about Hingham, *South Shore Town*) gently and personally and concisely summarizes much of this. She affirmed late in life that though outwardly she was eighty-three, “inwardly I am every age”:

The important thing is that at each age I am myself, just as you are yourself. During much of my life I was anxious to be what someone else wanted me to be. Now I have given up that struggle. I am what I am.

Well, who we *are* is one dimension of our “true colors.” But how we experience our lives and the world is another. To put it another way, aging is not just about who we can perhaps more freely and fully *be*, but also about how we might more fully *experience* our lives and the world.

Polly Francis, in an essay written when she was 92, which was published in *The Washington Post* and then entered into the Congressional Record in 1975, affirmed that in her experience “old age sharpens our senses.”

She concluded her essay this way:

The common expression, “so-and-so is failing,” is tossed around too freely. In aging we gain as well as lose. The autumn of human life, like the autumn of nature, can bring richness of beauty. It’s a time when our spiritual forces seem to expand. A life of the heart and of the mind takes over while our physical force ebbs away.

I know not everyone feels this way as they age. I hear plenty of testimony about the challenges of aging – the aches and pains are no fun; the decline of faculties and physical vigor is no fun. So as much as an affirmation, I hear in Polly Francis’ words – written, as we heard, when she was 92 – a *challenge* to all of us as we age, a challenge to accept as best we can the losses and to detect and embrace as best we can the “life of the heart and of the mind” that may be growing in spite of or in a paradoxical way because of these losses.

Again Polly Francis: She wrote of sitting by her window to observe “the azure sky” of a bright day, or to “watch a thing of great beauty die with the setting sun...” She wrote too of the “pain of compassion” she felt at the sound of a siren on the streets below. “My window,” she concluded, “has become a showcase of ever-changing wonderment.”

But of course the fall colors don’t last.

Yes, the leaves turn their yellow or gold or red.

Then they fall to the ground.

Soon they all turn brown, once again sharing a common color, not as bright as the first green, though in its own way every bit as filled with life, for the leaves will be absorbed into the earth to help nourish yet another season of growth, yet another generation of leafy green.

So – I hardly need say – it will be with us.

Yes if we are fortunate, and if we pay attention, we may have our season of blazing true colors, blessing the world with our unique gifts and passions in their full maturity. Even so, eventually, whether soon or late – we too will fall. We too will be absorbed into the earth, into life universal.

What then?

I don’t know. Some claim to know. Some say they have had experiences which offer a glimpse. Some say they have received messages from that land of whatever comes next.

As for me, I don't know.

And for now it doesn't matter much to me. ("One world at a time," as Thoreau opined.) For now my aim is to reclaim and reveal my true colors as I age. I know they're in there somewhere. And I know the world needs the gifts of my true colors, as it needs yours and everyone's. I know this not because either you or I are more special or gifted than anyone else. I know this because it is how the world works. We serve best through who it is we are most truly.

Now – a little coda here – one last thought.

Some elders have told me that they no longer feel that they are of use in the world. How human it is to want to be of use! It is one of the best things about us human beings... that we want to be of use, to help out, to pitch in. So of course we feel the anguish of no longer believing ourselves to be of use. (Not to mention that in a world with challenges that are daunting if not seemingly insurmountable, all of us are liable to feelings that whatever we do can't be enough...)

But here's my testimony, from my mere perspective as an observer of elders, and myself what I like to think of as an "elder-in-training":

The gifts of wisdom and love that so many of our elders offer the rest of us begin to depend less and less on strength of body or even of mind. Rather, we – the "youngsters" – are blessed by the simple *presence* of those among us who have achieved great age, their/your simple presence near the end of lives which for so many years did overflow with more tangible contributions and service.

Yes, wisdom, love, presence... often so lightly worn, yet quite present – the last and perhaps best flame of one's true colors on this earth. How much the less would we all be without the presence of these wise and compassionate elders among us, examples of true color aging, passionate about life aging, being more of who we are in the best sense aging.

Not that as we age we don't still have our cranky or complaining or cantankerous or curmudgeonly moments. We are all still human after all, whatever our age. But we all refract the light too, which often does shine more brightly – I've seen this; you have too – as our outward strength ebbs. Light. In living, true colors.

So – I don't know about you. But I'm curious to discover more of *my* true colors, to let go of whatever overlays of role and expectation, and to perhaps be surprised by what may be revealed closer to heart and marrow.

And I am inspired in this by those who precede me so beautifully in this quite stunning – for all of its sadness and suffering, still stunning and beautiful – pageant we call life. Inspired. And quite grateful too.

So let us show our true (our deeper) colors – sooner than later. It's just us, after all. Why not each of us be more truly who we are.

This is indeed, after all, how best we can serve life, and life more abundant – season to life-giving season, generation to life-sustaining generation.

So may it always be.