

**Aging with Spirit**  
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
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**Meditation**

It is our quiet time... our time to pause in the midst of our life's journey...  
To pause within the safety and shelter of this old house...  
To pause within the comfort of this loving gathering...

To pause and reconnect with the wellsprings of our lives...  
To once again find the ethical ground beneath our feet...  
To rediscover our sense of purpose...  
To allow the questions of our lives to seek an answer...

To pause and simply be renewed by the healing of shared silence...

May we be embraced by the silence, by this gathering, by this place...

**Reading**

The words of Pete Seeger, from *The Protest Singer: An Intimate Portrait of Pete Seeger*, by Alec Wilkinson

I always hated the word *career*. It implies that fame and fortune are what you're trying to get. I have a life's purpose.

These days my purpose is in trying to get people to realize that there may be no human race by the end of the century unless we find ways to talk to people we deeply disagree with. Whether we cooperate from love or tolerance, it doesn't much matter, but we must treat each other nonviolently. The agricultural revolution took thousands of years, the industrial revolution took hundreds of years, the technological revolution is taking decades. We may just see before much longer the moral revolution which leaders say can come, whether they've been religious leaders, or moral leaders, from Gandhi to Martin Luther King.

**Sermon**

In his book about Pete Seeger, *The Protest Singer*, Alec Wilkinson relates a story told by a friend of Pete's.

It seems that about six years ago this friend, John Cronin, was driving along busy Route 9 in Beacon, New York. It was a cold and rainy winter's day, the Iraq war deepening into chaos and ever increasing loss of life. And Cronin could see up ahead a tall, slim figure by the other side of the road holding aloft a cardboard sign. He could tell even from behind that it was Pete.

Cronin continued down the road and then turned around and drove the other way, so he could see what was written on the sign. As he made the turn, he thought to himself, "I know he's got some purpose, of course, but I don't know what it is." And true to Pete's character and approach to things, Cronin surmised that he probably hadn't sent out a press release to attract

attention to himself: “Here’s what I’m going to do, I’m Pete Seeger.” Instead, he was just doing what he felt needed to do, there and then, for whomever might pass, “standing there in the cold and the sleet like a scarecrow getting drenched” – eighty-four years old.

Then, as John Cronin passed Pete now in the other direction, he could see what was written in big letters on the sign: “Peace.”

Aging with spirit.

Looking at someone like Pete Seeger, we may well say to ourselves that he is extraordinary, that we couldn’t keep going the way he does at age 84 or, now, today, at age 90 (for today is Pete’s 90th birthday, being celebrated with a huge tribute concert in Madison Square Garden).

But though Pete *is* extraordinary in many ways, he is also a human being. And like any human being he has had his moments. He was discouraged as a young man – trying journalism, trying art, dropping out of Harvard College, struggling to get a career in music started, discouraged at how hard it could all be.

There have been other moments for Pete along the way.

Indeed, he was once asked if he ever gave up. His reply?

“Well, I give up every night about 9 o’clock; I say the hell with it, and go to sleep.”

But we heard in the reading a note of cautious optimism from Pete that we just might make it as a human race on this beautiful earth, a suggestion that a moral revolution is possible, that we can learn to get along, implying too that we just might find a sustainable way of life on this planet.

No guarantees. But it is people like Pete Seeger (who, by the way, is a member of the Unitarian Universalist Community Church in New York City) who give me hope, who give me courage to carry on as I age.

After all, I tell myself: if Pete – who has been in the midst of and often at the front of many of the great causes of our time (labor rights, civil rights, the environment, peace) – and this means has experienced all the setbacks and frustrations that come with such activism... if Pete can keep on, can age with spirit... why not me? Why not more of us? Why not all of us?

But how *do* we do it?

Here are the lyrics of a song that has been inside my head for a long time, one of Pete Seeger’s and one which suggests the love and compassion that is at the heart of why and how, for many of us, we keep on:

Oh, had I a golden thread,  
And needle so fine,  
I’d weave a magic strand  
Of rainbow design,  
Of rainbow design.

In it I’d weave the bravery  
Of women giving birth,  
In it I would weave the innocence  
Of children over all the earth,  
Children of all earth.

Far over the waters  
I’d reach my magic band

Through foreign cities,  
To every single land,  
To every land.

Show my brothers and sisters  
My rainbow design,  
Bind up this sorry world  
With hand and heart and mind,  
Hand and heart and mind.

Far over the waters  
I'd reach my magic band  
To every human being  
So they would understand,  
So they'd understand.

Of course we need not look as far as Pete for examples of aging with spirit, examples that can inspire us to try to age with spirit. We have only to look around us.

Not long ago, for example, we said farewell to Ware Williams, for over sixty years along with Alice dedicated member of Old Ship. And he had spirit to the end of his just over 91 years. And here at Old Ship we were among the beneficiaries of that spirit.

Ware didn't play the banjo or the 12-string guitar like Pete Seeger. But he had his own gifts to put to use on behalf of causes and institutions he loved: Roxbury Latin School, Harvard College, and this Old Ship. Among those gifts? On behalf of these institutions so close to his heart, Ware actually enjoyed asking for people for money! So in this spirit, his gift of enthusiasm and optimism was infectious as for many years he led the Friends of the Old Ship Meeting House.

Aging with spirit.

And of course we can look around in the pews today and see many other wonderful examples of people aging with spirit – in their sixties, seventies, eighties, nineties: artists, writers, activists, workers, parents... on it goes... on we go.

Aging with spirit.

And we can ponder this ancient house of meeting and worship itself. Talk about aging with spirit!

Our beautiful Old Ship Meeting House is filled with spirit along with the spirits of the generations of women and men who have worshipped here, who have debated here, who have mourned here, who have celebrated here.

Which isn't to say it has been all smooth sailing. This old house has had its ups and downs, too, just as we do in the course of our lives.

It was almost torn town a little over two-hundred years ago! Then the people of parish and town decided to repair it instead. So here we still are!

And our old Meeting House has changed appearance over the years – benches, box pews, bench pews, box pews again; changes in the windows; no ceiling, ceiling, no-ceiling; no paint, yellow, gray, yellow (or more accurately yellow-ochre).

We, too, know how this goes, as we change hair or fashion styles as we age.

The Meeting House has also needed a little support here and there, now and then – to reinforce this or that post or beam. Any of you who have had knee or hip replacement can relate.

Yes, with a little help from its friends, this old House is aging with spirit.

And not just as a building, a historical artifact, but as shelter *for* the spirit – for the spirit of democracy for all the generations during which Hingham town meeting was held here; and for the spirit of our religious lives for all the generations who have here sought deeper meaning and purpose.

Perhaps in this, too, we find a metaphor for our lives.

For are not our lives, our physical bodies and our minds, shelter for our spirits?

Which leads me to clarify that when I talk about “aging with spirit” I’m not just talking about aging with physical vim and vigor. For no matter how physically fit we strive to be as we age, our strength and energy will decline. I can’t run as fast for a mile as I did when I was twenty or thirty – or even as fast as when I was fifty. And I won’t be getting any speedier as I enter the next years and decades of my life.

But however fast I can (or can’t) run, or however much or little I can lift or haul, my body/mind remains shelter for what *can* be a continuing *deepening* of the spiritual life, the life which nourishes everything else in our lives.

I attended a seminar recently for ministers in their fifties and sixties – ministers “of a certain age” as I found myself putting it. We were considering together how we might shape the next years of our ministries, however many or few those years might be.

I expected to focus on this or that plan for what I might write or teach or preach, for how together here at Old Ship we would move forward in seeking fresh vision and mission.

Some of that came. But for the first two days we were encouraged by the seminar leader to turn inward. To seek to deepen our connection to our spiritual resources – in whatever ways we each do that, whether through meditation or prayer, writing in our journal, reading sacred texts or poetry, spending time in the woods or by the sea. Different for each of us, yet with a common purpose, a purpose which we might put this way: to learn or re-learn how to live each day and live into the future (which no matter how old or young we are means aging) more grounded in our spiritual lives.

In other words, “aging with spirit” might or might not mean becoming the life of the party that we may or may not have ever been.

But whatever our personalities, whatever our gifts, whatever our season of life, aging with spirit *does* mean tending to the wellsprings of the spirit... so that whatever we *do* in the world will continue to be nourished by and inspired by those wellsprings.

Ebenezer Gay preached in this Meeting House from 1718 to 1787; he died on a Sunday morning in his home on North Street, as he was preparing for the weekly worship service as he had for almost seven decades.

Some of you may recall learning that when he turned eighty-five Gay preached what became a much-reprinted sermon, “The Old Man’s Calendar.” He opened with these words:

The numbering of our days so as to apply our hearts to wisdom, is not computing the definite sum total of them to know how many they shall be; but the just reckoning them to be few and uncertain, and in consideration thereof, to live them religiously.

Gay’s language may have an archaic sound to our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears. But we know what he means. He was encouraging us to notice, really notice, that however long we might live, our days are few and our lives fragile. And: “In consideration” of the universal reality of the finite

number of days allotted us, Gay was calling his listeners – and us these many generations later – to “live them religiously.”

As I would put it: To strive to be awake each day to the beauty therein. To be attentive each day to each person we encounter, each person precious and unique. To discern the nature of our unique gifts and to be ever discovering how we can use our gifts in service to life... to others... to this dear and threatened earth.

There is no age limit to deepening our spirits in these ways.

We will falter. We may have moments of despair. We are imperfect. We will make mistakes.

Yet we have each other to help us along when we tire. We have ancient wellsprings of wisdom to renew our spirits. We have a place – this house – to shelter us in hard times and to inspire us all the time.

As we all strive – along with Pete, along with the likes of Ware, along with this old Meeting House itself – to age with spirit, and perhaps ever deepening spirit at that.

And if you’re struggling to discern where your spirit leads you now, you could ask yourself this question: If you were to stand by the side of a road with a cardboard sign for passing motorists to see, what word or few words would you have printed on your sign?

## **Benediction**

Whatever the season of our lives,  
    may we go forth today with renewed spirit.  
Living from deep within...  
Caring from deep within...  
Helping one another from deep within...  
Whatever the season of our lives,  
    may we go forth today with renewed spirit.

So may it be.