

LIFE TODAY

Lately I have been thinking about what it means to age. I wake in my small, cold, dark apartment. I am anxious and overwhelmed, frightened that I will lose everything. I *will* lose everything. How, I ask myself, does one replace fear with faith, when one has no trust and no belief? How does one go on?

All my life I have been asking what things mean. What does what happened to me as a child mean, when it made no sense? What does it mean to be gay? Depressed? An addict and alcoholic? An unpublished poet? And now, what does it mean to be an old man? What do I not understand?

I have been rereading Doris Grumbach's *Life in a Day*. I have always admired her astringent diaries. Never as popular as her friend May Sarton, who constructed a public self of exaggeration and omission, she is more modest and more honest. Grumbach, too, can idealize herself, describing how she reads *The Book of Common Prayer* at sunrise. But she also notes the crumbs she's dropped on it while marmalade toast. Clinically put, "Spirituality appears to play an important and adaptive role in aging that seems to lead to a better quality of life" (Lavretsky, 98). I take the hint.

("Staying put," Grumbach reminds us, was once considered a vulgar expression (6). How much more so "clinically?" I was once "clinically put" in Bournewood and Met State.

Where will I end up in my dotage? Grumbach now resides in a Pennsylvania nursing home.)

What have I learned about being old? Not much. Grumbach lives in a large house in which she moves about: bedroom, library, study, porch and lawn. Morning room. She is surrounded by books. She reads like I do, a few pages here and there, randomly. A writer, much of her day is filled with not writing. Celebrating solitude, she does not live alone.

Thomas Merton, who wrote about the necessity of solitary life, built his hermitage on convent land, whose members, I suppose, provided him the conveniences of health care and hot food. The truly solitary life, he claimed in *Thoughts on Solitude*, differs from the partial one which “can be enjoyed from time to time in the intervals allowed by social living.” (109) Living alone, I walk to *my* convenience store, drycleaner, bank, and like Grumbach, post office, where she refrains from speech, while I do not.

To her credit, Grumbach admits sharp criticism from another older woman who has fled a failed marriage. Declaring her “kinship” with the author of *Fifty Days of Solitude*, her correspondent bitterly adds, “I only wish that, like you, I was assured of an end to this solitude,” inserting “an anguished confession of unfulfilled dreams, weakness, loneliness, a sense of wasted life.” Grumbach responds inadequately with a “sparse, unsatisfactory postcard.” (29-30)

Located on the Maine coast, the “myriad windows” of Grumbach’s house face woods, water, sky. Bird feeders hang outside. I too have a view: the corner of Albemarle and St. Botolph, which I glimpse from the window to my right when I sit at my desk. The rising sun strikes the red brick of the apartment block opposite. Below, a father waits for the school bus with his autistic son who excitedly flaps and chirps with a neighbor’s barking dog. The father, I notice as he zips up his son’s jacket, is devoted to him. Our souls are continually refreshed by the world.

Income, if not wealth, secures Grumbach’s comfortable life. She and her partner Sybil may live frugally, but they do eat out. They own their house. Grumbach, I suspect, has never purchased a book. Writing about Julian Mazor, who published a single volume of stories and continued to work for decades afterwards, Grumbach takes note of the “investments” and “reserves” that allowed him to do so in an efficiency apartment in Washington DC. Recently, I met a retired neighbor who asked me how much I paid for rent and then told me that having sold their million-dollar house he and his partner no longer can afford to live on my street. I panicked. I know will lose my home. I have *stayed put* too long.

As I think about my morning, I see how it resembles Grumbach’s. We both have fashioned the quiet space we require to create. Even as I listen to the BBC, with its dreadful news of a terrorist attack, pay overdue bills, and check the email which had yet

to intrude on Doris, who sorted and read her letters, I think about writing. Shall I finish “Prayer,” or start “Mere Faith?” Shall I enclose “Practice” with my check for the Kathleen Raine chapbook I bought? This morning is a gift of aging, which calls forth acknowledgment.

What, finally, do I have in common with Doris Grumbach? Reading, writing, rumination. A house full of books, a head full of thoughts. A life of music and art, discovered in youth. (That too makes for a modicum of content.) “Overwhelmed by the catastrophes of the day”—a harsh review and the failure to write—she finds no relief in her nightly prayer. (139) And then recalling how Florence Nightingale lived for fifty more years after her anticipated death, laughs. We share the joke.

David M. Eberly

Works Cited:

- Grumach, Doris. *Life in a Day*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.
Lavretsky, Helen. *Resilience and Aging: Research and Practice*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.
Merton, Thomas. *Thoughts in Solitude*. (1958) New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1999.

