

The challenges of aging

My grandmother Nielsen always limped carefully along when she came to visit. We loved her a lot; but I was a young boy then, and I remember holding back when grandma made funny noises, or when I smelled something unusual around her. She seemed a little older than Methuselah then. She wasn't, of course, it's just how little boys see things; and like little boys, we all see things differently,

Young folks are quick to notice how different old folks are: they don't see or hear too well, after all, they forget things, they walk far too slow, their bodies become twisted and they limp a little; they grunt a lot and make funny noises when they breathe, or eat, and sometimes they don't even smell all that good—and that turns the young folks off.

It's too bad, too, for what younger folks don't always realize is that older folks can't control all those distracting things. They are eager to retain their dignity, though, wishing all the while that they had control of their bodies like they did when they, too, were young and strong; but the older they get the more things are simply beyond their power to control.

The problem is that the house they live in is starting to fall apart, and it's not pretty. A body that was once a tidy little cottage, that shimmered in the sun and protected them in the rain, now has rotting boards and shingles falling off; the plumbing is noisy and leaking; the paint is peeling and the sidewalk's cracked; while rooms, and minds, are dark at times from the gloom of loneliness.

So when things happen that are a bit offensive, why not cut the old folks some slack. Remember that 'what goes around comes around' and that it will be your turn much sooner than you think. And when it does you'll want the younger folks to cut you a little slack too.

The poem below is a tribute to their endurance and faith.

OLD HAND

By Robert Fitt

Old hand, How you have aged; How textured you've become.
In youth your smooth skin rippled over muscled Motion
Now it's wrinkled even when relaxed, with green-tinged veins twining
like Grapevines Through your bones.
And when I contemplate this paradox of change . . .
The hands gripped tightly and fatigued beneath the ax and sledge . . .
Grim tightening on pain-worn shafts as handcarts pull away . . .

The hot breath of the branding iron causing two-fold pain . . .
The dust-breath of the sun-baked shovel's Grit . . .
The hurt-hardened calluses of endurance beyond endurance . . .
The hardening and aging, the motion slowed, and hair turned white
With fingernails ridged and worn.

How strangely wonderful it is—
Despite the struggles that have made it so—that the gentle motions of
your hand
Have become ever Softer to my cheek.