

Change and Control

I will admit that I am aging and on some days it feels more obvious to me. I cannot deny that the body is not as supple, or strong, or as coordinated as it used to be. Despite my efforts to avoid and, at times, accept the issue, my aging can neither be stopped nor reversed. Now that I have stated one of the most obvious and, for some people, the most depressing facts of life, let me take some time to consider what this really means.

What is aging? It is simply that with the passing of time, my lifespan is being consumed. I am able to understand this fact because I have been given life itself, which allows me the cognitive ability to work out this simple reality. With this ability, I understand the concept of time and its interaction with, and its relevance, to my passing lifespan.

Throughout the duration of my life, thus far, my body has continually changed and I believe that process will continue for an unknown amount of future time, too. I feel that I have been fortunate to have a strong and healthy body, which I have nurtured for the majority of my life, but at times, I have abused it. Like most people, during my formative years, my body grew in size and in strength. A natural limitation that was built into my genetic string stopped my growth at a certain point. I have never heard of anyone who continued to grow or to gain strength. Throughout much of my life, I have been athletic and have worked to influence how my body grew. But natural limitations again have imposed restrictions as to what extent these changes can be manifested. I could not grow to be 10 feet tall, train to run a one minute mile, nor could I lift a train. Such limitations and many others have been carried within my genetic strings.

My genetics also included indicators as to my vulnerability to certain diseases. My own father died of heart failure and I felt for a long time that my years of road racing and running for fun would hopefully prevent my also experiencing heart problems. But, there was a flag in my genes that indicated vulnerability to heart issues. Now like my father, I also have heart issues. The running never prevented them, but I feel convinced that the running better prepared my cardiovascular system to sustain itself through the worst of the episodes. Genes could have indicated the vulnerability and possibility of a health problem, but my lifestyle heavily influenced the outcome when it did occur.

Additionally, experiences and the situations, to which I have been exposed, potentially influenced the strains of illnesses that had a higher potential to strike me and how they ultimately affected my life in the following years.

The way that I have lived my life has had a direct bearing on how worn out or compromised my physical frame has become with the passing of time. But just in the actions of basic / essential living such as eating, breathing and sleeping, my body has been worn down, too. As my body reaches what some may call the senior years, my worn body parts are less capable to ward off disease and avoid injury, which further compromises my ability to sustain a fully-functioning, healthy body.

A multitude of factors, such as those that have just been described, contribute to how my bodies ages. I probably am as accepting of this undeniable truth as anyone, but I am experiencing aging in my own unique fashion. Nobody else will experience it in the same way as me. Given these types of considerations and our individual unique genetics, it is not surprising that we all age differently. We are all unique, but we all experience aging in some distinct fashion.

I cannot avoid having to acknowledge that my body is aging, but it can be expressed with a less provocative word – change. Change can more easily be accepted in my mind as it covers the growing and strengthening of my body when I was a toddler as well as the degeneration of it and all of the variations between these two. No matter what I happen to be doing at any moment, it is constantly changing because millions of cells are dying each minute and being replaced. This replacement of cells is one of the cornerstones of life itself. Without this replacement of cells, I would die very quickly. As a result, I am thankful that my body is perpetually changing. Considering this, I would suggest that change is a really good phenomenon. As change in this context is synonymous with aging, then I must also celebrate that I am aging.

Looking at change from another vantage point, I have sometimes been upset by change when it affected my material goods. I will be unhappy when I see the first scratch on my new car. But, if my new car never suffered any scratches or noticeable changes, there would be little incentive to buy another new car. On the other hand, with every scratch, I become less infatuated with the car. Even if my car still looked and performed perfectly, in time, new technology will become available or I simply will become bored with the car. In such cases, my relationship to the car will have changed even though the car itself has not changed, leading to my again becoming less infatuated and ready to contemplate buying a replacement. So change stimulates movement or growth, which essentially drives society and the economy. Again change can be seen as necessary and a good phenomenon.

I used to find unexpected changes very unsettling and uncomfortable. It caused me to think that I needed to have control over my life. To a certain degree, control could prevent some changes. But, when unexpected changes that were not under my control happened, then I became distraught. It felt like I had been affronted by life. But, in reality, it was simply a reminder that change is actually a very natural occurrence. To think that control will avoid changes only resulted in my experiencing a feeling of grave disappointment. In fact, in accepting that change is a natural part of my life, I can clearly see the consequence of my desire for control – it is not at all productive and only leads to distress and further misery. Through experiencing life over many years, I have come to realize that letting go of control is one of the healthiest responses to concerns about changes. Be careful, there is a marked difference between control and planning: I believe planning is a very appropriate and needed action.

Over a long period, I have volunteered as a chaplain and have had occasions to discuss life and expectations with a large number of people from all walks of life. I have found

one particular group of people who truly understand this notion of letting go of their desire for control. They are those with a terminal illness or a serious chronic medical conditions. They understand the profound changes that their condition has forced on them and how nothing that they could have controlled would have changed the outcome. These people have been given the gift of learning to let go of their desire to control. The desire for control can be very seductive. I hope that you can also learn to let go too before life throws you an ugly curve ball that will force you to see control clearly.