

“Wisdom from Centenarians”
for the Unitarian Society of Hartford
January 3, 2016
Rev. Heather Rion Starr, Co-Minister
Worship Associate: Sue Smolski

“And still you may protest, ‘But what about the person who drinks like a fish, smokes like a furnace, eats like a hog, and is nonetheless 85 years old?’ By the same analogy, you may once in a while drive from San Francisco to Los Angeles at 120 miles an hour and still get there— but don’t bet on it.”—Walter Bortz, M.D., President, American Geriatrics Society

“A society’s quality and durability can best be measured by the respect and care given to its elder citizens.”—Arnold Toynbee

“The ancients have stolen all our best ideas.”
—Mark Twain

PRELUDE

Pi-Hsun Shih

Comptine d’un autre etc: l’apres-midi from *Amelie* by Yann Tiersen
Theme Song from Disney Pixar’s *UP* by J. Ramos

*GATHERING SONG #361

“Enter, Rejoice, and Come In”

OPENING WORDS

Rev. Heather Rion Starr

Good morning. It is so good to be with you this morning. In the words of our gathering song today: Open your hearts every one. Don’t be afraid of some change. May this day, this year, be a joyful one for us all.

We celebrate life, today. We celebrate the new year and all its fresh crispness, the new calendars, the unknown beauty of what we hope lies ahead. We celebrate the mystery and possibility of new beginnings. We celebrate longevity and long lives well-lived. We celebrate *life* today. Come, let us worship together.

CHALICE LIGHTING

Betty Arnold and her son Doug Arnold will come up to light our chalice

this morning. While they're doing so, will you please join us in the chalice lighting words, printed in your Order of Service.

“We light this chalice for the warmth of love, for the light of truth, for the energy of action, and for the harmony of peace; peace in our hearts, peace in our community, and peace in our world.”

WELCOME & RECOGNITION OF VISITORS

Worship Associate Sue Smolski

*GREAT COVENANT

*Love is the spirit of this church and service is its law.
This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace,
to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.*

*HYMN #6

“Just as Long as I Have Breath”

TIME FOR ALL AGES

Rayla Mattson

DEPARTING BLESSING

TURNING INWARD / MEDITATION / PRAYER

In our congregation this week, we celebrate the 100th Birthday of our oldest living member, **Betty Arnold**, who first came to this congregation when she was 11 years old....As we move towards our time of silence today and reflecting on the wisdom of our most-elderly elders, I share with you this poem, by Wendell Berry, called “Ripening.”

[Ripening]

“The longer we are together
the larger death grows around us.

How *many* we know by now
who are dead! We, who were young,
now count the cost of having been.

And yet as we know the dead
we grow familiar with the world.
We, who were young and loved each other
ignorantly, now come to know
each other in love, married
by what we have done, as much
as by what we intend. Our hair
turns white with our ripening
as though to fly away in some
coming wind, bearing the seed
of what we know. It was bitter to learn
that we come to death as we come
to love, bitter to face
the just and solving welcome
that death prepares. But that is bitter
only to the ignorant, who pray
it will not happen. Having come
the bitter way to *better* prayer, we have
the sweetness of ripening. How sweet
to know you by the signs of this world!"

...Having come
the bitter way to better prayer, we have
the sweetness of ripening. How sweet
to know you by the signs of this world!

CANDLES OF MEMORY AND HOPE

It is a great mystery we all live with every day, the mystery of: *how long will we live?* This great mystery can be both a wondering and a worrying. Many of us, I think, engage in an incredible struggle between trying to live in the moment *and* be prepared for anything that might happen in the however-many-years we have ahead. What if—we ask ourselves—what *if* I live to be one hundred years old?

This universal reality of our growing older haunts our best movies and music—how many of you spent any time this holiday season listening to Adele’s lyrics?—“We gotta let **go** / of all of our **ghosts** / We all **know** we ain’t kids **no more**.” She jokes in a recent *Time* article that the album could be titled “Old,” it is so preoccupied, even at her young age of 27, with the awareness of aging. I’d love to get the chance to ask Adele if she thinks about how long she’ll live. Some among you have said to me: I don’t necessarily *want* to live to be 100! And yet we might, we just might, there’s something somewhat inexplicable about it.

I had the pleasure of visiting with Betty Arnold at her home in Wethersfield in December. Her home is so pleasant and peaceful—it matches her spirit. I love seeing what stays true, the essence of a person shining through, even as we each age. David Newton compiled some of Betty’s memories of this congregation from a 1988 oral history interview and posted them on our website—do check out and savor those stories. There are countless things that are challenging about living to be a hundred years old, but Betty has some clear mantras that help guide her through it, in particular: “Why worry about it if there’s nothing we can do about it?” and “Take one day at a time.”

For all of us, when thinking about how long we might live, there’s a real tension between *quantity*, or length, of life and *quality* of life—I love how John Robbins, in a book I’ll share more from with you later, talks about not only

our “life span” but our “health span.” How do we live not just long lives, but healthy, lively ones?¹

While preparing for this sermon I was delightfully presented with a book I commend to you—it’s called *Earth’s Elders: The Wisdom of the World’s Oldest People*, by Jerry Friedman, and it includes Interviews and Photographs of 50 Supercentenarians—people who have lived to be over 110 years old. Published in 2005, many of those who Friedman interviews were born in the late 1800’s, such as Pearl Gartrell, born in 1888 in Georgia. “If you were to ask me why she’s as old as she is,” Friedman writes after meeting with her, “I guess there are many factors. A life of hard work, being fit and not overweight, eating simple foods, and having a deep-seated faith. Add to that a rare genetic component for aging slowly. When I asked *her* why she’s lived as long as she has, she smiled and said because of Jesus and because she could cry. ‘Men don’t cry, they hold it in,’ she said” (*Earth’s Elders* 89).

Here are fifteen more tidbits of wisdom from the world’s centenarians:

1. “Aunt Anna believed in oatmeal; she had a bowl every single day” (EE 29).
2. Pray, in whatever form that takes for you, every night before bed, let go of the day and prepare yourself for the next (EE 76).
3. From Fred, born in 1890: “You have one life to live, live it well, and don’t disgrace your family” (EE 80).
4. From Hazel, born in 1889, and interviewed at 112 years old: “Worry... comes from an Anglo Saxon verb to choke, that’s just what it does to you. It’s one of your worst enemies” (EE 86).
5. Sing, every day. “Singing boosts endorphin production, and exercises the soft palette (which diminishes snoring)...[(who knew?!)] It also increases lung capacity, producing more oxygen for more brainpower” (29).
6. Mary, born in 1892—“What gave her inner peace was her belief system, her profound sense of a force that was larger than herself. She seemed to derive her strength from this core of faith that had been unshakeable

¹ Another Adele lyric: “I want to live / and not just survive” —from *Love in the Dark*, on 25

- throughout her life. It had helped her through the deaths of loved ones and the rigors of farm life” (EE 109).
7. One woman, and also my 92-year-old grandmother, swear by a daily tablespoon of gin, sometimes gin-and-gin-soaked raisins.
 8. Living through and surviving the Great Depression or Hiroshima or other hard times early on in life gave many of the centenarians a deep sense of resilience and a sustaining clarity about the difference between genuine needs vs luxurious wants. Catherine, born in 1891, said of her childhood: “there was enough food to put on the table but there was never anything extra” (EE 111). “Everything in moderation” is a recurring centenarian mantra.
 9. Emma Verona Calhoun Johnston, born in 1890, says: “Be careful about choosing your parents. Make sure they have good genes.”
 10. Swami Bua, born in 1889, interviewed in Manhattan at 110 years old, said: We live long “because of all God’s grace, supplemented with good thoughts, good eating, pure vegetarianism, humility, no anger or jealousy, and loveableness” (EE 121).
 11. Julia, born in 1893 in Peru and a long-time resident of Cape Cod, advises: “Swim daily in the ocean. Take walks around the garden.”
 12. Many centenarians encourage us to appreciate the washing machine as the women born in the late 1800’s do; it has transformed all our lives.
 13. Joan Moll, born in 1889 in Spain suggested we: “be respectful, support freedom and tolerance, adhere to a steadfast work ethic, [and] focus on the positive events in our lives and our world. ‘Life is worth living,’ he says, ‘because we constantly [get to] see that new things are discovered’” (EE 129).
 14. Consuelo, born in Morocco in 1892, for whom “the happiest moment in her life was ‘when [she] came to the United States’”—she advises us to “eat little, don’t worry about how much, lots of olive oil and garlic” (EE 131). Consuelo became a citizen of the United States at the age of 106.
 15. And back to “Aunt Anna—she always began the day as though she were

having guests. She fixed her hair and put on a fresh dress, usually with a pretty pin. She always wore hose” (EE 30). (And other life wisdoms you may not have heard mentioned much from this pulpit before.)

There are so many more fun insights that could be shared here, and though there are sometimes contradictory suggestions, some things do stand out: a healthy diet, regular exercise, a positive attitude, connection to community and to a larger sense of purpose or the sacred.

How long will we live? These are ancient, human questions. Is it fate or our free will, our freely choosing to eat or be more or less-than-our-healthiest, that will determine how long we live and how we die? We live with this mystery. There is plenty of evidence that it’s not *just* genetics. Scientists, doctors and anthropologists who study longevity say it is only 1/4 our genetics that determines our lifespan. “We [do] have the power to alter our life course,” one team of longevity specialists writes. (67 OP).

So other than making it *to* one hundred, what else have centenarians today witnessed and learned of the world? To be a centenarian today is to have been alive on this planet since 1916. There is no time-lapse photography that can capture how the world has changed in these past 100 years—they have been full, complicated, transforming and transformative years.

“Emma,” born in 1890, feels that the automobile was the greatest change of the last century. She remembers clearly: “I was in high school when I had my first automobile ride. A Stanley Steamer!” (EE 114). Years ago now, my grandmother retired from her job as a school secretary and said she’d felt she’d done so just in time—she didn’t have to acclimate to the new thing in the office: The Computer.

I know *I* still remember the big heavy suitcase that was my family’s first household computer—it took up the whole table, the keyboard detached from one end, the screen was about the size of a book, and the text was green on a black screen. And still, I loved to play games on it: Zork was my favorite, anybody here remember or play Zork? It was entirely based on typed commands: Go left. Take two steps. Pick up the saber. Look around. Walk forward. It would have absolutely *no* appeal for kids today. Change happens so fast and sometimes so completely it is hard for us to fathom life before...

whatever that thing is. But it's wonderfully challenging for us to try, and to experience our elders as people with the "the cumulative wisdom of a [entire] century" (OP 12).

What still lies ahead for us that is unique to *our* time, this 21st century? In his book, *Healthy at 100: How You Can — at any age — dramatically increase your life span and your health span*, John Robbins writes: "We live now in a time that has been called 'the great turning.' In such a time, I believe it is [now] *our* task to sustain the gaze, to be attentive both to what is dying and what is being born, to what is marred and what is beautiful. We are called to be unafraid of pain *and* unafraid of joy, to remember that no feeling is final, and to affirm our power to make a difference" (Robbins 294-5). Those are more abstract recommendations than most of our centenarians', so I'll repeat them, because I think they're poignant, beautiful, and true:

"It is our task, [now,] to sustain the gaze, to be attentive both to what is dying and what is being born, to what is marred and what is beautiful. We are called to be unafraid of pain *and* unafraid of joy, to remember that no feeling is final, and to affirm our power to make a difference." We need one another to do these things. In so many of our longest-living peoples' lives, community sustained them. Robbins observes, Friedman emphasizes, so many doctors, scholars and journalists notice: the essential nature of a supportive, interconnected community. Robbins writes: "One of the secrets of the cultures in which people often live long, healthy, and happy lives is that they have ways of expressing and sharing their joys with other people, and perhaps even more importantly, their fears and their griefs. They recognize that we *all* have times when we feel overwhelmed and defeated, when we feel terribly alone, when we are tempted to hide in a corner and feel sorry for ourselves. They know we *all* have dark nights of the soul, and they understand that at such times it is necessary to have others to go to, others with whom we can be emotionally vulnerable and honest. In this way, even in the midst of our despair we are reminded that we are part of a community, that there are others who care about us, and that we are still part of the stream of life. Our grief becomes a source of *connection* to who we are, to our passion, commitment, courage, and vulnerability" (Robbins 294).

As I was working on this sermon, I would have liked to have talked to centenarians in my own family—but there aren't any, yet. My grandmother Norma will turn 93 this year, and in February Cathy, Robin and I will go to Kansas to celebrate her grandmother Betty's 100th birthday. The others who I carry around in my mind and heart have all passed away. My paternal grandmother, who I called "Tilly" by her request because she identified more as Tilly-the-toiler than as a grandparent, died when she was 85; she would have turned 102 this year². Her death and her adamant request that there be no memorial service or other acknowledgement of her death is part of what moved me to consider the ministry, some 17 years ago now—I still remember, sharply, my own confusion and longing for some kind of closure, some kind of family gathering or recognition of her death and her life, her particular significance in all our lives. There are so many ways that I still carry Tilly's independent spirit, sharp tongue, and energetic determination around with me and in me. And perhaps this is some of the wisdom of centenarians—they live on. They are all still in us and with us to the degree that we allow them in—our now-silent guides and teachers, listeners and mentors, still. Many of you, I know, feel as though those you've loved who are no longer living are still, in some ways, with you—accompanying you on your journey. As in Wendell Berry's words:

"...[A]s we know the dead
we grow familiar with the world.
We, who were young and loved each other
ignorantly, now come to know
each other in love, married
by what we have done, as much
as by what we intend. Our hair
turns white with our ripening....
It was bitter to learn
that we come to death *as we come*

² Helen M. Starr was born August 18, 1914.

to love, bitter to face
the just and solving welcome
that death prepares....
Having come the bitter way
to better prayer, we have
the sweetness of ripening.
How sweet to know you by the signs of this world!"

...In closing, a few lines of another poem for you—the lyrics to the song that will follow this sermon, thanks to the ingenuity of Pi-Hsun Shih, our accompanist today—this, from Five for Fighting's song "100 Years":

"I'm 15 for a moment
Caught in between 10 and 20
And I'm just dreaming
Counting the ways to where you are
...Half time goes by / suddenly you're wise
Another blink of an eye / 67 is gone...—
...I'm 99 for a moment /
Dying for just another moment
And I'm just dreaming,
counting the ways to where you are."

May songs and love and poetry and mystery and new life continue to fill our hearts every day that we have to live. May you resolve, this year, to articulate for yourself exactly what it is you most cherish about living, and then: do more of *that*, create more of whatever that is that brings you joy, in your life. May you know also your interconnectedness with all life, and do what you can to help mend the fabric of our frayed world. May we find peace within ourselves, within *our* time, this time we have been blessed enough to be so achingly alive in. May it be so.

OFFERING

100 Years
Five for Fighting

Worship Associate
Pi-Hsun Shih

***CHALICE EXTINGUISHING**

*We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth,
The warmth of community, or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.*

***BENEDICTION**

Please reach out and find the hand or shoulder of those near you. Let this simple gesture be a profound reminder to you: we are all interconnected. We need one another. Life is a crazy wild ride: do not attempt to go it alone. Know that we are here for one another. Reach out to each other, every day. Let this journey, however uniquely long or short it is for each one of us, let this be a journey we take together. Let the love we give freely to one another help to ease the pain we all carry. With thanks unto the end, may we now sing, just a little more. Our closing hymn is #18, "What Wondrous Love."

***CLOSING HYMN #18**

"What Wondrous Love"

SOURCES

The Okinawa Program: How the World's Longest-Lived People Achieve Everlasting Health—and How You Can Too, by Bradley Willcox, Craig Willcox, and Makoto Suzuki.

Earth's Elders: The Wisdom of the World's Oldest People, by Jerry Friedman.

Healthy at 100: How You Can—any any age—dramatically increase your life span and your health span, by John Robbins.

also, this:

<http://www.100wisdom.com/Super-Centenarians/>

<http://money.usnews.com/money/retirement/articles/2013/01/07/what-people-who-live-to-100-have-in-common>

100 Years by Five for Fighting

I'm 15 for a moment
Caught in between 10 and 20
And I'm just dreaming
Counting the ways to where you are

I'm 22 for a moment
And she feels better than ever
And we're on fire
Making our way back from Mars

15 there's still time for you
Time to buy and time to lose
15, there's never a wish better than this
When you only got 100 years to live

I'm 33 for a moment
Still the man, but you see I'm a 'they'
A kid on the way, babe
A family on my mind

I'm 45 for a moment
The sea is high
And I'm heading into a crisis
Chasing the years of my life

15 there's still time for you
Time to buy and time to lose yourself
Within a morning star

15 I'm all right with you

15, there's never a wish better than this
When you only got 100 years to live

Half time goes by
Suddenly you're wise
Another blink of an eye
67 is gone
The sun is getting high
We're moving on

I'm 99 for a moment
Dying for just another moment
And I'm just dreaming
Counting the ways to where you are

15 there's still time for you
22 I feel her too
33 you're on your way
Every day's a new day

15 there's still time for you
Time to buy and time to choose
Hey 15, there's never a wish better than this
When you only got 100 years to live