



## **Aging Perspectives from Memoirs and Poems**

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Packet prepared for educational purposes.**

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## The Second Half of Life

### Opening the Eight Gates of Wisdom

*Throughout history, images of thresholds and gates have served as symbolic passageways into new worlds. Imprinted on the human psyche, they herald the possibility of a new life, a new experience, or a new identity. They offer an opportunity for communion between different worlds: the sacred and profane, the internal and external, the subjective and objective, the visible and invisible, waking and dreaming.*

The Silver Gate – Facing New Experiences and the Unknown

The White Picket Gate – Changing Identities, Discovering One’s True Face

The Clay Gate – Intimacy, Sensuality, and Sexuality

The Black and White Gate – Relationships – The Crucible of Love, Generosity, Betrayal, and Forgiveness

The Rustic Gate – Creativity, Service and Generativity

The Bone Gate – Authenticity, Character and Wisdom

The Natural Gate – The Presence of Grace – Happiness, Satisfaction, and Peace

The Gold Gate – Non-Attachment, Surrender, and Letting Go

From *The Second Half of Life* (2005) by Angeles Arrien. Boulder, CO: Sounds True

## **Midlife: Some Potential Tensions**

Valuing Wisdom vs. Valuing Physical Power

Generativity (maximizing potential) vs. "Over the Hill"

Socializing (companionship with both men and women) vs. Sexualizing

Emotional and Mental Flexibility vs. Rigidity

Years Yet to Live (anticipation) vs. Years Lived (memories)

Independence vs. "The Caught Generation" (caught between your parents  
and  
your children)

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developed by Ted Bowman, based on concepts of Richard Hey

## Listening, Following and Bibliotherapy

Poets have revealed themselves and have analyzed (the human) condition long before human behavior was conceptualized as a science...The poet entices participation. In effect, he says: “Here are my sorrows and my joys, my hopes and my fears. It pleases me to share them with you. If you see yourself in the mirror of my art and feel comforted or strengthened, follow me.”

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from “Preface” by Lewis Wolberg, in *Poetry therapy* (1969) edited by J.J. Leedy. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company.

The effectiveness of bibliotherapy depends on the facilitator’s ability to choose material that speaks to the individual participant’s needs and interests; to make accurate, empathic interpretations of the participant’s responses; and, through literature and dialogue, to draw out deeper self-understanding. In short, a good bibliotherapist is a skilled listener.

### Literature as Catalyst in the Therapeutic Process

Recognition

Examination

Juxtaposition

Application to Self

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from *Bibliotherapy - the interactive process: a handbook.*(1986 and 1994) by Arleen McCarty Hynes and Mary Hynes-Berry. St. Cloud, MN: Northstar Press.

## Preparing for Fifty

It came to me that I needed a valley.  
It came to me that I was done with the salmon  
as my totem, how it scrapes its way upwards over rocks,  
how the body quivers and strains, as if waiting  
to be touched for the first time. All that is fine  
for thirty, even forty, but for two years now I've believed  
in fifty, someplace where who I am counts for more  
that who I might become. Last week at long last,  
I found a valley where I could be the small thing  
for once. I could lie down in the hot springs and just be  
covered. I swayed there in the water and waited  
for the calm that becomes a body at fifty.  
It came to me how to be at home on my back,  
my genitals floating above me, an obscure species  
of water lily drifting back and forth,  
hardly attached to the long and clumsy root  
of the body. Soothed and silenced by water, it was here  
that my life has brought me, wrinkled as the day I was born.  
This time around I was calmer, more sure  
of how water and earth work together to offer me up  
to the valley. As if I were a human sacrifice,  
given up in the name of love, baptized in water, flesh  
and blood in the valley of stone until the last breath.

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from *The Long Experience of Love: Poems* (1995) by Jim Moore. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, p. 70.

## Broken Pact

A face ages quicker than a mind.

And thighs, arms, breasts,  
take on an air of indifference.  
Heart's desire has wearied them, they chose to forget  
whatever they once promised.

But mind and heart continue  
their eager conversation,  
they argue, they share epiphanies,  
sometimes all night they raise  
antiphonal laments.

Face and body have betrayed them,

they are alone together,  
unsure how to proceed.

From *Evening Train* (1992) by Denise Levertov. New York: New Directions,  
p. 29.

## On Aging

When you see me sitting quietly,  
Like a sack left on the shelf,  
Don't think I need your chattering.  
I'm listening to myself.  
Hold! Stop! Don't pity me!  
Hold! Stop your sympathy!  
Understanding if you got it,  
Otherwise I'll do without it.!

When my bones are stiff and aching  
And my feet won't climb the stair,  
I will ask one favor:  
Don't bring me no rocking chair.

When you see me walking, stumbling  
Don't study and get it wrong.  
'Cause tired don't mean lazy  
And every goodbye ain't gone.  
I'm the same person I was back then,  
A little less hair, a little less chin,  
A lot less lungs and much less wind  
But ain't I lucky I can still breathe in.

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by Maya Angelou. found in *Lifelines: A Poetry Anthology Patterned on the Stages of Life*.  
(1994) selected by Leonard S. Marcus. New York: Dutton Children's Books.

## The Layers

I have walked through many lives,  
some of them my own,  
and I am not who I was,  
though some principle of being  
abides, from which I struggle  
not to stray.

When I look behind,  
as I am compelled to look  
before I can gather strength  
to proceed on my journey,  
I see the milestones dwindling  
toward the horizon  
and the slow fires trailing  
from the abandoned camp-sites,  
over which scavenger angels  
wheel on heavy wings.

Oh, I have made myself a tribe  
out of my true affections,  
and my tribe is scattered!

Though I lack the art  
to decipher it,  
no doubt the next chapter  
in my book of transformations  
is already written.

I am not done with my changes.

How shall the heart be reconciled  
to its feast of losses?

In a rising wind  
the manic dust of my friends,  
those who fell along the way,  
bitterly stings my face.

Yet I turn, I turn,  
exulting somewhat,  
with my will intact to go  
wherever I need to go,  
and every stone on the road  
precious to me.

In my darkest night,  
when the moon was covered  
and I roamed through wreckage,  
a nimbus-clouded voice  
directed me:

"Live in the layers,  
not on the litter."

*From Passing Through: The Later Poems: New and Selected (1995) by Stanley Kunitz. New York: W.W.Norton & Co., pp. 107-108*

## On the Brink of Everything

Age brings diminishments, but more than a few come with benefits. I've lost the capacity for multitasking, but I've rediscovered the joy of doing one thing at a time. My thinking has slowed a bit, but experience has made it deeper and richer. I'm done with big and complex projects, but more aware of the loveliness of simple things: a talk with a friend, a walk in the woods, sunsets and sunrises, a night of good sleep.

I have fears, of course, always have and always will. But as time lengthens like a shadow behind me, and the time ahead dwindles, my overriding feeling is gratitude for the gift of life.

Above all, I like being old because the view from the brink is striking, a full panorama of my life—and a bracing breeze awakens me to new ways of understanding my own past, present, and future. As one of Kurt Vonnegut's characters says in *Player Piano*, "out on the edge you can see all kinds of things that you can't see from the center."

From *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity and Getting Old* (2018) by Parker Palmer. Oakland: Berrett-Kohler Publishers, pp. 1-2.

## On Closing the Apartment of my Grandparents of Blessed Memory

by Robyn Sarah

And then I stood for the last time in that room.  
The key was in my hand. I held my ground,  
and listened to the quiet that was like a sound,  
and saw how the long sun of winter afternoon  
fell slantwise on the floorboards, making bloom  
the grain in the blond wood. (All that they owned  
was once contained here.) At the window moaned  
a splinter of wind. I would be going soon.

I would be going soon; but first I stood,  
hearing the years turn in that emptied place  
whose fullness echoed. Whose familiar smell,  
of a tranquil life, lived simply, clung like a mood  
or a long-loved melody there. A lingering grace.  
Then I locked up, and rang the janitor's bell.

"On Closing the Apartment of my Grandparents of Blessed Memory" by Robyn Sarah  
from *Questions About the Stars* (1998) London: Ontario: Brick Books.

## **The Husband**

He comes every day to eat lunch and sit  
with her in the sun room. Sometimes he reads  
letters out loud from their children or friends;  
sometimes he reads the paper as she sleeps.

One day the staff makes her favorite cake  
to celebrate their anniversary,  
and tells how, to buy her ring, he worked  
months of overtime at the factory,  
so she thought he was seeing someone else.

“As if I would have looked at other women  
when I have Pearl,” he says, shaking his head.

She begins to cry and tells him, “You’re sweet,  
but I miss my husband.” He pats her hand.

“I know,” he says, “It’s all right. Try some cake.”

From *Love and Other Collisions: Poems* (2010) by Joseph Mills. Winston-Salem: Press 53,  
p. 75.

## Requiem

It came to me the other day:

Were I to die, no one would say,

“Oh, what a shame! So young, so full

Of promise — depths unplumbable!”

Instead, a shrug and tearless eyes

Will greet my overdue demise;

The wide response will be, I know,

“I thought he died a while ago.”

For life’s a shabby subterfuge,

And death is real, and dark, and huge.

The shock of it will register

Nowhere but where it will occur.

From *Endpoint and Other Poems* (2009) by John Updike. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, p. 93.

## The Chapter Exercise

Create a table of contents – chapter titles for your life story. Choose words or phrases that capture the spirit of that time in your life.

Gasping for Air

Top of the World

My Life as a Goldfish

Take note of the ebbs and flows of life and how you characterize them

## The Path You Have Followed

Find or create a large surface of cardboard or paper. Using crayons or colored pens, draw maps of your life

Crossroads where you faced a major decision or made an important choice

Side roads that were attractive, but that you didn't explore

Sharp curves where you changed your direction completely

Places where you found yourself back where you started or dead ends where you had to retrace your route

Significant mileposts

Stopover points

Sites of wonderful experiences

Destinations you headed for...before you decided to bypass them and keep going

Washouts, detours and roadblocks

Places where you broke down, ran off the road or had a collision

## The River Named "You"

You are the river

Where are your headwaters? Where did you come from? What is your *source*?

Sources important to you – in-flow

Are you wide, shallow, narrow, deep, slow, fast? Full of rapids...or come down gradually?

Are there significant communities along your banks?

Is there traffic on your river? What kind?

What is the topography of the land you run through?

Where are you presently on your journey from source to destination or end?

From *The Way of Transition* (2001) by William Bridges. Cambridge: Perseus Publishing.