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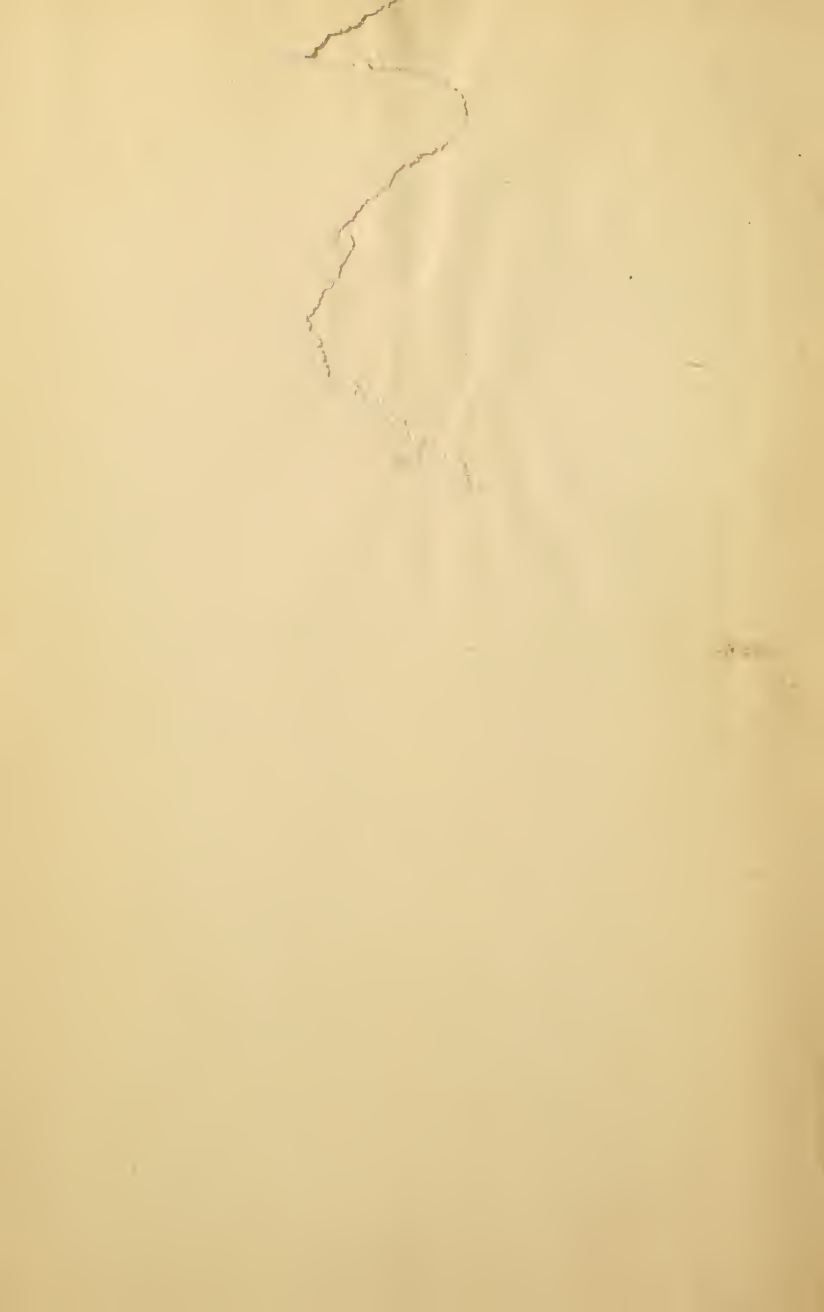
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HOW TO GROW OLD.

A Sermon

BY
PAUL REVERE FROTHINGHAM.



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HOW TO GROW OLD.

A Sermon

IN MEMORY OF

HORATIO HOLLIS HUNNEWELL,

PREACHED IN THE ARLINGTON STREET CHURCH
ON SUNDAY, MAY 1, 1904.

BY

REV. PAUL REVERE FROTHINGHAM.

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How to Grow Old.

“Much experience is the crown of old men, and the fear of God is their glory.”—ECCLESIASTICUS XXV. 6.

WHEN THEODORE PARKER preached his famous sermon on Old Age he began by asking all old persons to forgive the imperfections of his discourse, since he was not able to speak exactly from personal experience, but merely from outward observation. “You know,” he said to them, “what I can only see. Pardon me, if I mistake. I read from only without, you can answer from within.”

Were I to preach on the same subject here this morning I should feel disposed to ask for similar forbearance. And perhaps in any event it may be wise to do so, though it is not of Old Age that I intend to speak, but only of growing old; and of the “much experience,” together with “the fear of God,” which ought to come and crown all those who are conscious of the gathering years.

Not all people attain to the dignity of being old: but all of us, with each month and week that passes by, draw somewhat nearer to the shadowy portal. Though we may not cross the unseen threshold, and enter the mystic temple with its dim and flickering lights, we stand at least in the outer court, and dream at times of what awaits us should the silent doors swing open to admit us. All of us, that is to say, though we may not

really reach old age, at least grow older year by year ; and Amiel truly said that "to know how to grow old is the master work of wisdom, and one of the most difficult chapters in the art of living." My subject, therefore, while it makes appeal to some of you more forcibly than to others, is not without its interest for all. It is in times of peace that men prepare for war ; in days of plenty that they provide against the seasons of want ; in the weeks of spring that they arrange for the harvest of the autumn. Hence it is that in middle man or womanhood, and even in the period of youth, we should study the conditions, and acquaint ourselves with the ideals, of that always possible period when the work of life seems finished and its outward energies begin to fail.

We begin by asking, therefore, What should be true of us, in a moral and spiritual sense, as we tend to grow old? What qualities of heart and mind should appear in fuller and more rich development? What weaknesses must we guard against : what temptations study to resist? Though the old man may not do, or even be, what the young man may, is it not possible that other and even greater things may fall within his grasp as the shadows lengthen toward the great unknown. For, as years ago it came to be seen and understood, "Great things are accomplished, not by strength or swiftness ; but by counsel, influence, deliberate opinion ; of which old age is not wont to be bereft, but to possess more abundantly."

We are apt, of course, and people have always been inclined, to lay particular emphasis upon the things that we lose, and of which we become deprived in the process of growing old. This is only natural, for they are evident to all. The body shrinks. Its physical energies become impaired. Its vital forces slowly ebb

away. And in ancient times, when the worth of men was largely measured by their value in war, these facts were given undue prominence. The truth in part became forgotten, that the real man is the inner one of mind and soul and conscience, and that long after the physical energies begin to decline the mind continues to enlarge its powers, and the heart and soul to show their undeveloped possibilities.

God's pleasure in right proportion is one of the things which the world makes very evident. When He takes away with one hand He gives with the other. If He scatters here, He increases there. If He destroys in this direction, it is only to fulfil in that. Compensation is one of the deepest truths of which He grants to us a glimpse, and we see it written everywhere around us: in the day that appears more brilliant because the night has gone before, in the joyous spring-time that follows after winter sadness, and in the cool of autumn when the heats of summer have oppressed us.

And thus it is in this matter of growing old. As the physical energies decay and one by one decline in force, God means, I think, that the moral and spiritual energies shall increase, and take on new and greater glory. This matter of getting old, therefore, when we lay hold upon it rightly, and enter into it with understanding, should literally be a matter of *growth*. We do not *become* old, merely, or *appear* old; but when we live as God intends we should, we *grow* old, — grow in grace, grow in wisdom, grow in that experience which opens to us things that are closed to others who have never known the advantage that is ours. In speaking therefore of Old Age we do not speak of loss alone, but of gain besides; not of deficiency only, but also of opportunity; not of privation merely, but of privilege as well.

It was a well known man of science, whose life has been spent in taking careful and constant account of facts, who told the world but a short time since that he had noticed in women, as they left a half a century of years behind them, "a considerable enlargement of intellectual interests;" and he said, "that so general does this appear to be, that it may be regarded as normal, and indicating a natural tendency of the mind to claim its right in the peculiar period of old age." * He declared himself as satisfied, too, from what he had observed, that in men as well, the same enlargement tends to occur, and needs but a little fostering to become normal. In other words, as the work of the body changes, as the animal passions lose their vehemence and become more easily controlled, the interests of the mind and heart assert themselves more forcibly and claim a new attention. The spirit becomes enfranchised.

But let us leave the realm of generalities and look at matters of detail. It is not enough to say with the Hebrew author that "much experience is the crown" of people as they grow older, and "the fear of God their glory." Let us see what the special virtues are into which experience should ripen.

I will not waste our time by speaking at any length of the things that we should guard against. We all know what they are. Old age is often crabbed and complaining. And it must of course be hard, when the work of life is done, and its opportunities are past, for a person to see others succeeding where he has failed, and securing honors when a grudging fate gave him no cause for pride. As the arch of their years descends † it is inevitable that people should see

* N. S. Shaler, "The Individual" pp. 282, 283.

† Dante, "Purgatory," Canto XIII.

others ever coming to the front, and assuming positions of power and importance. Those whom they have looked upon as youthful, ignorant and careless, crowd them out, and introduce new methods, manners, principles. It is a constant and insidious danger, therefore, lest people, as their years are multiplied, grow pessimistic, scornful and unjust. The old author sees his books unread upon the shelves while some boyish writer captivates the public taste, and one edition follows another quickly. The gray-haired lawyer, doctor, man of business, sees the methods he has used and championed thrust aside and looked upon as obsolete. The world is busy and forgetful, and seems to take but small account of what the man, who is getting now to be a patriarch, accomplished in his prime. All this is hard. It is an ever present danger with people lest in growing older they grow cynical and bitter, — finding fault with the manners and ethical methods of the younger generation.

And another danger, — familiar, too, which we may mention only as we pass, — is excessive caution or conservatism. The man who once looked forward, trusted, hoped, believed the best and watched the first gleams of the coming dawn in many an arching sky, now sits and gazes at the sunset glow and waits to see the night shut in. He puts no faith in things that are new. He has seen so much of failure, he declares, — so many a noble scheme that came to naught, — that now he would leave things as they are, believing that the old is good enough, and the well-established best. Yes: this, too, is a danger all must guard against in growing older. The toil of life, with all its sad experience, will often tend to make us hopeless preachers of discouragement and woe.

But I have spoken thus in order only to light up the

more, and reveal in stronger contrast, the beautiful and worthy things that age should ripen in us slowly.

1. The first of these that I would name is Generosity. It is clear enough, as any one may see who gives the matter serious thought, that we ought in the normal course of things, as we grow older, to become more generous. The young man needs to provide against the future. While strength is granted, and the day still lingers, he must make his way, and earn and save. The emergencies of the future may be many. He can not foresee them all. Others may become dependent on him. It is all uncertain. Not that this allows him to be close, and hard, and selfish, — not at all! It only keeps him from giving all that he would like to give. But when the needs of life grow less, and the twilight hour draws near, then it is surely true that the impulse of the youth should be the joy and satisfaction of the older man. What he has earned with difficulty, or saved with care, or inherited from others, he now should make a point of giving away with glad and happy judgment to children, friends, dependents, public causes, charities. Why keep them waiting till his will is opened? Why deprive himself of a mighty source of pleasure and contentment? As the wise and mighty Solon said of himself that he grew old *learning* something every day, so it is a beautiful and inspiring thing to see people now-a-days who grow old *giving* something every day. It keeps them young when they do so. It identifies them with the interests, the enterprises, the busy work of the active world. They have not retired. They are not yet left behind in the race of life. Their influence was never so great, perhaps, as it is in these later years of a long and active life. It is they who supply the sinews

of many a moral warfare: they who direct, and order, and make possible many a movement of reform. Ah! how wise it is, as well as natural, when, in growing older, people grow more generous as well. For then it is that not children only, but dependent causes, grateful beneficiaries, rise up around them and call them blessed. They receive of the ripened fruit of their harvest years, and their works attend them in a glad procession.

2. Generosity, however, is not the only quality that should ripen in us through the cloud and sunshine of the passing years. I would name in the second place Simplicity. As people grow older they should come to care less for the pomp and display of the world, with its surface magnificence and ornament. The young man or woman is often ambitious to live in as large a house as some neighbor does, with as many servants and horses and the same degree of luxury and show. He heaps up cares and multiplies possessions, and looks around with satisfaction on the things that he is said to own. As his thoughts go back to the meagerness of his beginning, and the small things out of which his life has grown, he says to himself with pride that he has made his fortune.

But the time comes later, if men's lives fulfil their natural course, when the joy of these things tends to pass away. The lessons of the years remind us that the merely outward is of small account, and that only the inward is of value and abides. In growing older we come to care more for the *comforts* of life, and less in proportion for the *luxuries*. The old man turns back with longing almost to the simpler ways of life that once he knew. He likes things that are real, and that have the semblance of enduring. Acquaint-

ances are less important, friends more sacred than before. Romance fades; but affections grow. Passion passes; but deep instinctive love glows on with broadening reach. The honors of life, if he has gained them,—the titles of distinction,—sit lightly on him now, and he warms himself instead before the flame of human confidence and tenderness, as it shines out in the lives of children and of children's children. These become of greater worth, in his days of wisdom and reflection, than stocks and bonds, houses and lands, and all the symbols of material prosperity. He has been growing inwardly through all the changes and vicissitudes of life. He sees at last that the simplest pleasures of the world, the most natural and human treasures, are the best that any one can lay up in abundance.

3. Let me speak of another quality that should silently unfold in us as the harvest period of life draws near. It is that of Magnanimity or Forbearance, one evidence of which is gentle and beneficent Courtesy. I think God means us as we grow the older to become more tolerant of the faults of others, more forgiving of their errors, and more broad in all our interests and sympathies. And in this respect His will is often very nobly done. For nothing in the world of human character and intercourse is much more evident and beautiful than the way in which the roughness and crudities of life give silent place to refinement and delicate perceptions. The young man who is injured is in haste to injure in return, for his blood is quickly heated; and, because he knows the world's allurements, he is over-ready to believe the worst. Life is a battle with him, and just as he takes hard blows, and faces want of confidence, so he feels

that it has to be with others. But the older we grow the more we acquire the grace and power of being considerate. Where we were hasty and intolerant once, we learn to wait and defer to others. Thus the charity adorns us of which the great Apostle spoke, which "is not easily provoked, rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth: beareth all things, believeth all things, endureth all things."

And this is not a matter of demeanor only, and of outward courtesy. It is rather the expression of a gentle and benignant spirit,—the result of education, discipline, and inward training carried on in silence. The very struggles of the world, and the myriad vicissitudes of life, conspire to teach us tolerance.

4. Having spoken thus of these moral elements that deepen and grow stronger in us with the passing years, what shall we say of life's religious, or spiritual qualities? It is clearly true that God intends that these should ever more and more become our portion. Though the bodily energies may one by one grow less and less: though the mind may reach its highest point of power, and even visibly decline: how often it will happen that the soul's light shines unfading on, and even grows to be more strong and steady. The ancient Hebrews credited the Patriarchs with a power of prophecy. It came to be believed that the aged were admitted, as it were, to the mind of the Eternal, and shared in some mysterious way His counsels. And what is this but a crude and artless way of saying that the older we grow the more spiritual becomes our outlook, the deeper our knowledge, the firmer our trust, the more steadfast our confidence in things divine. The old man's eye is dimmer; but he discerns things at a greater distance. His hearing

is perhaps impaired; but he listens with new reverence to the voice within. His grasp is feebler; but he clings with even greater firmness to the unseen rock of truth that abides forever.

And when we think of it, how much there is in the course of life to deepen our dependence, to strengthen our trust, to quicken our faith in Power and Goodness that we can neither see, nor wholly understand. While we were active, and alert to originate and achieve, we had reliance in ourselves, and in our power to accomplish. Through all the wild intoxication of our hopeful youth, and all the vigor of our manly strength or womanly patience, we dreamed of unknown good to come, and went our way attended by the waking thought of some success or some supreme achievement. But now we have done what we could; and though others think it much, we ourselves see how little any single life can do. It is God whose power flows around and through us; *God* whose life and will it is that sweeps the generations onward, and ever swings the tide of progress upward. Our feebleness but calls attention to His strength; our transiency makes more significant His permanence; and round our restlessness there flows His rest.

And now, my friends, do you ask me how it happens that to-day, at this refulgent and prophetic season, I speak to you of things like these? For

“The year’s at the Spring,
And day’s at the morn.”

Around us everywhere are signs of new and abounding life. The world is whispering to us, not of growing old, but of things forever young and perennially fresh. Then why should we not join the chorus

that all nature sings, and speak of things that age can never wither, and no lapse of time destroy? For reason, I point you to this Window here, which we gratefully receive to-day in memory of one of the oldest and most highly-honored members that this church has ever had; and also to this beautiful marble Font, a special offering in the same abiding memory. Our church receives these gifts to-day at the hands of his family. And as we do so it becomes an inspiration and a joy to think together of the qualities which made that life so strong in manhood, and so rich in influence. For of him it is that I have all this time been speaking.

I shall always count it as among the happy privileges of my life that my ministry began here while Mr. Hunnewell was still a living power in this church, and a prudent counsellor in its affairs. To one who met him for the first time then, it was difficult to believe that here was one who had outlived nearly all of his contemporaries, until at last he came to live and work with those who were one or two generations younger than himself. In thinking of him we recall the words of Cicero, — “The old man does not do what the young men do; but he does greater and better things. The best-fitting and defensive armor of old age consists in the knowledge and practice of the virtues, which, assiduously cultivated after the varied experiences of a long life, are wonderfully fruitful.” Here indeed was one who practised to perfection that most difficult chapter in the art of living, and knew how to grow old. And what were the qualities that distinctly marked him, — radiant, beautiful, and clear, — if not those very ones that I have called attention to. His *generosity*! how unflinching it was, and never more abundant than in the last

few years of his long and happy life. He lived upon the principle established by the ancient Hindu sage, that "Large rivers, great trees, wholesome plants, and wealthy persons are not born for themselves alone, but to be of service to others."

And his generosity had this touch of nature in it, that it was something always to be relied upon. He did not open his hand one day, and keep it closed the next; but he gave with regularity and persistency. And then how wisely he gave. So far as I know he had no narrowness in his philanthropy; but he supplied needs as he saw them, and answered demands as they were made upon him. Only this was true, that he gave to his *Church*, and to the *religious cause* he loved, with special gladness always, and deliberate conviction. Nor do I speak of financial things alone. For he was generous in many ways. He enjoyed things most when others enjoyed them with him.

And what shall we say of his simplicity? Ah! what need we say, for it showed itself in little ways as well as large. The modern mania for display and extravagance, and foolish, criminal waste, found no disciple in him. And in this respect he set a much-needed and most helpful example. Too often men make their fortunes only to mar their characters, and, because outwardly rich, grow spiritually poor. But it was not so with him.

Nor was it different with those deeper qualities, which we have seen that age should ripen in us. His love of nature was only one expression of his trust in God, which went with him, and upheld him to the last.

But we have no need to praise him and to do him honor. For he honored both himself and the age in which he lived. To have occasion once again

to think of him is only a benefit for ourselves. As we accept with gratitude these memorial gifts to-day they fitly may renew in us his love for little children, which was not the least among his many delightful characteristics.

He was one of Nature's noblemen. He could say with the ancient Roman, "I am glad I have lived, since I so have lived that I think I was not born in vain." He left the world more beautiful than he found it. The harvest of each year he lived was more abundant than the last.

As we think of him, we say to ourselves that if this be the course of life, we may indeed repeat the brave words of the poet:—

"Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made.
Our times are in His hand,
Who saith, 'A whole I planned;
Youth shows but half: Trust God:
See all; nor be afraid.'"



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