



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

## Learning from Aging in this Time and Place

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So what on earth do my title and my two readings have to do with each other? They all relate to my recent surprise at some of the consequences of something that a lot of us know something about, but a lot of us don't think about very carefully: If we stay alive, each of us gets older.

Let's begin with the profound importance of valuing and respecting old age in the traditional Chinese culture, still very much alive amid the high rise apartments and traffic jams of Beijing or Shanghai today. The Chalice lighting contains an appropriately off-center reference to the Old One, *Lao Zi*, the mythical and sometimes deified author of a deep and cryptic text, *The Way and the Power (Dao De Jing)*. The *Analects of Confucius (Lun Yu)*, a record of the Great Teacher's comments to his disciples around 500 BCE, offers basic clues to the importance of understanding and respecting aging, and leaves the reader to figure out what to make of them, or to ask his or her teacher, which of course is another form of respecting an older generation. In the first passage, the teen-ager whose mind is already set on learning at thirty has a junior place to stand for a court ceremony or a solid moral foundation, at forty no more doubts, at fifty a sense of his own destiny, at sixty is reconciled to it, and at seventy no longer is tempted by impossibilities and immoralities. The second, only fourteen characters in length, mourns a loss of intensity of pursuit of the great sage Duke of Zhou, not the High King but the regent uncle of a child High King's, who was thought to have brought moral order to the Chinese world about five hundred years before Confucius' time. In the first passage we have a positive reading even of changes at age seventy; in the second, the great quest is still there but the unconscious is not cooperating by delivering those potent dreams. In both, the embodied process of aging is looked at with eyes wide open.

Which is where Williams comes in. William Carlos Williams was one of the great American modernist poets of the early twentieth century. He also was a physician in general practice in Rutherford, New Jersey; his poems show him much more in touch with the grit and terror of ordinary life than his fellow modernists. When he finds something strange, pay attention. Some of you, including Xochitl Gilkeson, will be delighted to know that he couldn't stand a lot of recent poetry in English but thought Shakespeare was by far the most searchingly human poet in the language. I'm not sure how much I want to make of the fact that his parents were founding members of the Unitarian Church in Rutherford. "A Forgotten City" may well draw on his own experience of the great 1938 hurricane. We all have had moments when, in a place we thought we knew, we encounter a strange commonplace. Even in Pasadena.

I have recently encountered a strange commonplace called aging. My adult life made denial easy. If you ran a big lab at Caltech or USC, worked on big projects at JPL, or ran a risky and demanding business, when you retired you had to find new things to do as compelling as your cutting edge research or daily risk-taking had been. Neighborhood Church is one of many volunteer-dependent worthy causes that is delighted to fill the void. But a retired historian just needs an internet connection, a wallet full of library cards, and an occasional plane ticket and

he or she can insist that the scholarly career continues. I read or write toward the next publishing project just about every day. So the assisted living facilities whose vans appeared at the Target or the super market weren't for me.

Then in February of this year, in the open west end of South Pasadena, I ran my car onto an almost invisible low traffic divider. The car was totaled; the air bags went off; I had just a few bruises. A week or so later, three of our five adult children asked to talk to me. Dad, we've been worried about your driving for some time. (They had never told me.) We think you should stop driving. And we're worried about you living alone where if you fall no one will know for days.

These conversations are pretty common as more of us live past eighty with at least some of our mental and physical abilities intact. Denial is possible: Give up driving? Give up my independence? No! I do not entirely understand why I just said OK, what next? Perhaps it was because I was so surprised to see the kids coming together. They are excellent adults who have followed straight and crooked paths to different careers, families, lifestyles. We don't get together very often. Of course, especially with questions like Dad's driving, there can be a lot of phoning and e-mailing we never hear about. So my first strange commonplace is the enduring power of family connection that may show up only in time of crisis. I now use the word "solidarity" for this kind of elemental coming together.

So by early May this year there I was in two rooms at the Fair Oaks assisted living facility. I am not going to get into the complicated ethical and policy questions of the place of such facilities in our society. This is a good one. And conversations across dining room tables very quickly revealed that for almost all of us family, usually adult children, had been involved in our coming to this big change.

A second strange commonplace, a second solidarity, emerged in those cross-table conversations. We remember the same times. Most of the men did military service; there was a draft. A few are World War II veterans. The life experiences include teaching and business in China, major positions at Hollywood studios, doctoring in South-Central LA, and much more. Women outnumber men two to one. Many women raised families at a time when the wife was expected to completely subordinate her interests to husband and children, which surely accounts for their obvious pleasure at sitting back for a long chat after lunch or going off for a round of bridge or bingo. Let's call this generational solidarity.

"Solidarity" as a moral concept has one of its roots in the labor movement, with a sense of the latent power of all those workers pouring through the factory gates when the shift changed. We also should remember the brave beginnings of the struggle against Soviet tyranny by Lech Walesa and others in the Polish Solidarity movement. Can solidarity be overdone? Of course. Rev. Lissa's recent sermon on "No Single Issue Lives" had some important points on this. But when we cherish our most "natural" solidarities, like family and generation, we should be more ready to listen to and work with those who seem more "other." Lost a love? Lost a job?

Still not at home with anything you've tried on Sunday morning? We all were there once. It still hurts, but there's another day, another year.