

# The Perfect Age



by Andrea Caswell

I know the names of several grandmothers and “greats” from whom I’m descended—Adelaide and Josephine and Apollonia—but I don’t know much about

their bodies. Growing up, my Grandma May taught me how to crack an egg, how to squeeze a lemon after picking it from her tree, and how to knead dough correctly (it's not as easy as it looks). She had an 8th-grade education and didn't read for pleasure, but there was a book with a faded black cover that she sometimes read to me, which included stories of Baba Yaga. Oh, that Baba Yaga! She made mischief wherever she went. If my Grandma May and I talked about the human body at all, it would've been while watching Jack LaLanne in the den after lunch. He led us in stretches and jumping jacks and toe-touches. Sometimes we made fresh carrot juice, meant to improve our eyesight and digestion.

My mom didn't tell me much about menopause, but if she had, would I have listened or cared? What young person thinks she will ever have hot flashes? In college, I bought the book *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, but didn't read all the way to the menopause chapter; I was more focused on birth control and childbearing. My mom took hormones in her 50s, perhaps I knew that, and then at 70, she developed breast cancer. She had surgery and survived. For that reason, when I entered perimenopause a few years ago and hot flashes began, the hot-as-hell flashes and dry skin and thinning tissues, I didn't consider taking hormones. I briefly used a vaginal cream that contained estrogen, but I didn't like the way it made my breasts tender and swollen. It seemed ridiculous, really, to have these painful breasts and feel pregnant at age 54. So I stopped all of that and settled into the beginning of menopause.

I didn't know estrogen was involved in everything from cholesterol levels and pelvic floor strength to heart health and brain function. To be honest, I'd kind of taken hormones for granted. I didn't appreciate how critical they were to desire, for example. Now that I'm 56 and the estrogen is seeping away, I miss a few things. I miss the supple skin and not worrying about sneezing too hard. I miss my libido; sex isn't that important to me anymore, nor is looking "sexy." My plan is to never wear high heels again. And my sweet husband, who's had to navigate the trickle of this diminished estrogen flow, still loves me just as much as ever. When I developed a condition called frozen shoulder, he playfully called it "cold shoulder" and we laughed.

For previous rites of passage in my life, namely childbirth, I'd used positive affirmations to make the experience more—well, positive. Most cultural depictions

of childbirth I'd seen showed actresses on sit-coms, screaming in cars while their husbands drove like maniacs to a hospital. Before that, there was the frightening film in junior high health class that shocked us all, especially when they projected it on the huge auditorium screen. My mom had almost died when I was born, due to a complication called *precipitous labor*. Clearly childbirth was something dreadful to be feared, maybe even avoided, via anesthesia if possible.

But when I was 24 and expecting my first child, somehow I knew childbirth didn't have to be awful. I sensed that it was in fact something very sacred, connected to all the birth energy in the universe. I went to the library and checked out books written by midwives. I practiced mantras like *Every contraction brings me closer to holding my baby*, which, let's face it, is true. When I went into labor, the affirmations made it easier to appreciate and work with those strong uterine muscles. My daughter was born naturally, in a calm delivery with a midwife, and I learned I was right to believe in my body and its abilities.

Three decades later, I wondered if positive affirmations might help for the menopausal rite of passage. I have a set of affirmation cards by the artist Louise Hay; the cards are laminated, filled with bright artwork and colorful lettering and whimsical designs. I like to sort through them for articulate reminders of what I believe, or when I need an extra zap of courage. There's one that says *I trust my inner wisdom*, and that still serves me well. Recently, I found one in the deck about aging: *I am at peace with my age. Each age has its own special joys and experiences. I am always the perfect age for where I am in life.* How beautiful—*I am always the perfect age*. This runs counter to what the wellness industrial complex would have us believe about our bodies, and about the stages and seasons of life. While doing errands last week, I saw an ad for an "aging management system" in front of a beauty shop (not far from where I parked my "pre-owned" car). The point is: I'm not going to let society—especially capitalism—tell me how to feel about aging, or sell me expensive ways to fight these natural changes in my body.

I admit (as if it were a crime) that age spots have developed on my face and hands, more like small freckles than large outbreaks at this point, but visible, plain as day. Am I happy that my teeth are becoming a bit crooked, after years spent wearing braces and retainers? Not exactly. Do I wish my skin were not so very thin and dry, that it could be supple and smooth again? Sure, but not

because I want to deny the progress of the years. I liked that firm young body I had.

The hardest part about aging has been negotiating the surprise of change, and in particular, the out-of-control feeling when changes happen whether I want them to or not. I *can* choose my inner relationship to my body, though, and how I talk to myself about it. Rather than step back from the mirror in horror, I feel sure it's a privilege to grow old. I remember the schoolmates and friends who died too young—Kim, of cancer when we were 12. Virginia, in a car crash at 19. David, of leukemia at 24. Another David, of AIDS at 37. They did not have a chance to age. So when I catch myself thinking negative thoughts about wrinkles and spots and imperfect teeth, I try to replace them with gratitude. It's not toxic positivity or denial, just a choice about how I want to relate to my body. I'm trying to be true to myself, to this woman before me in the mirror. I try to say, *Hello Beautiful*. Hello person who has survived. Hello.

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