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My days with the other old yoga ladies

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Soul Seeing

Something unexpected is happening to me in this spring's Senior Center yoga classes. Something over and above the shock of finding myself at 79 in the "old-old" category. There's no denying it: I was born in 1933, the year Hitler took power, the banks closed and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Who could have imagined that someday we'd all be living so much longer?

In the 50 years Dan and I have lived in our New York river town on the Hudson, far fewer children play in the streets but many more gray heads fill the aisles of the A&P, the church pews, and the library tables.



Our spanking new community center offers daily senior activities and

services. Besides yoga there is tai chi, line dancing, aerobics, computer classes, swimming, shopping, lectures, luncheons and regular holiday celebrations. Unexpectedly, as a member of the aging exercise scene, I am having the novel experience of becoming attracted to the beauty of old women's bodies.

Instead of feeling dread and revulsion toward aging flesh as the fashionable media have it, my response

has grown positive and pleasant. How natural and endearing it seems to have loose padding on upper arms, necks, middles and behinds. Perhaps a harbinger of my changing perspective was sounded several years ago when my grandson asked what those flopping things on my upper arms were, and I shot back, "That's excess wisdom, Liam."

By now the crinkles, creases, brown spots and moles on bodies advertise character. It's just as lovely to be filled out, veiny or boney as it is to be fit, toned or strong. That worn and well-used look has charms.

My appreciative range for bodies has extended far beyond my habitual baby worship. Who can resist plump little hands and feet, miniature ears, big eyes and rounded foreheads? Our delight in babies arises from the promise of their future. With an aging woman's body, it is the marks of past living that appeal. Engraved on the faces, figures and hands are decades of experiences undergone.

Think here of the aesthetic appeal of old houses and antique silver and furniture. A distressed finish and a well rubbed-patina attract our eyes. Fading flowers and autumn leaves manifest beauty. Trees filled with moss or gnarled by winds express variety. On the Maine coast we wonder at Earth's history in the eroded rocks.

The old bodies of women at the Senior Center bear witness to abundant long-term use. Their flesh is imprinted with a lifetime of loving care: sex and childbirth, mothering and grandmothering, nurturing the ill and coping with loss have left their traces. When I look at their hands I think of the decades of cooking, cleaning, celebrating and enabling work for their families and community. A large part of this generation was engaged in homemaking rather than full-time careers. But who knows? Retired PhDs don't look different from anyone else.

I wonder if these other yoga ladies are as surprised as I am by becoming so old. Since my self feels the same as it ever did, I'm often startled by looking in a mirror, or seeing the gray hair of my spouse, friends and middle-aged sons. My adult children's friends are beginning to look old!

It's so odd to have lived so long as my body while constantly changing. The "I" is the same, but the bodily me grows different. My body is past time and experience made visible. There's that childhood scar, those stretch marks, the trace of operations, loosened muscles, capped teeth -- along with laugh lines (and cry lines) galore.

The embodied person living through time is a mystery of mysteries. Our ever changing, not so solid flesh speeds ever faster through time, but toward what? Our faith says that our embodied selves are on the way to a new more abundant life of joy with God. Our life on Earth is a fireworks display flaming up into invisibility. The hope that sustains us is that new birth is coming. It is right to affirm that the marks of aging are a good and holy sight.

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Old age is bringing me ever more gratitude. And my weekdays with the old yoga ladies are teaching me two truths. Delight, not disgust, is the divine Creator's way with bodies. And just as true, God is a God of surprises.

[Sidney Callahan was one of *NCR*'s early and most popular columnists. Her newest book is *Called to Happiness*.]

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