



The old man and his doctor

Roger Ladouceur MD MSc CCMF FCMF, ASSOCIATE SCIENTIFIC EDITOR

*Old age is a stage in our lives,
and like all other stages
it has a face of its own,
its own atmosphere and temperature,
its own joys and miseries.¹*

Doctor, I am consulting you about the state of my health.

My condition is fairly stable. Of course, like everyone else, I am getting older year by year. Strangely, I am not aware of this. The days and weeks pass by without my really noticing them. Years succeed each other, and I am not conscious of them. The other day, I realized that almost 10 years had slipped by since the arrival of the third millennium, and I had not seen them go. Time has passed quickly. It seems like only yesterday.

In truth, I feel no older and no younger than I did yesterday. Of course, I do not have the same energy as before, I feel more tired, and I am full of new aches and pains, but I have difficulty perceiving that I have aged. In my own mind, I have the impression of being as I always was. If these old photos of me were not around to set me straight, I would be able to fool myself into thinking that I had not changed. Reason tells me that I am getting older, but I haven't come to realize it yet. And I am certainly not the only one who has this problem. The other day, my neighbour, an "old" lady of 89 whom I hadn't seen for a while, made me smile. When I saw her, I said to myself, "My goodness but she's aged." Round-shouldered, with wrinkled skin, a gaunt face, a cane in her hand, and an unsteady gait, she said to me, "You know, I don't notice myself getting older; I feel just as young as before!"

Could it be that we are not aware of time passing? Could it be that growing old happens only in the eyes of others? Or only in the documents that attest to our age?

If that's the case, why do we have such fear of growing old? Why do we battle against time and its so-called ravages? Why do we spend a fortune camouflaging our first wrinkles, our first gray hairs? Nobody wants to grow old. If a magician offered us the choice between being young again and suddenly becoming old, few would opt for the golden years. We are all, like Faust, ready to sell our souls to the devil in exchange for our lost youth. Having surgery, injections, and laser treatments creates an illusion for ourselves and for the camera. We fool nobody, least of all death.

Why are we so afraid of growing old? Probably because it is the prelude to death, the final stage. And while the thought of our own death repels us and seems inconceivable, growing old itself is repulsive. Everyone wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to die, right? But growing old and dying are the natural order of things.

Doctor, one day, without doubt, I will be old—at any rate, older than I am today. I will no doubt have various diseases. I will be short of breath. My heart will race at the least effort. My memory will fail. I will walk unsteadily. When that happens, remember above all, whether I have rheumatism, lung disease, heart failure, Alzheimer disease, or Parkinson disease, that I will be simply an older version of myself.

I hope when that day comes, doctor, you who have known me all my life, me and my family, will understand that growing old and dying are normal stages in our existence. And I hope that you will help me through these stages just as you have helped me through all the others up to now. 

Competing interests

None declared

Reference

1. Hesse H. On old age [Lindley D, translator]. In: Ziolkowski T, editor. *My belief*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 1974.

