

THE
WONDER
YEARS

40 WOMEN OVER 40
On Aging, Faith, Beauty, and Strength

LESLIE LEYLAND FIELDS, *editor*

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Publications

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INTRODUCTION

I am looking into the mirror. Not the “mirror, mirror on the wall,” which kindly tells me whatever I want by a quick dim and flick of the light switch, but the far scarier one: the mirror in my hand that magnifies my face by a factor of ten. Under this painful scrutiny, I skip over my pores and crow’s-feet and go right for the brows. I count a record number of grays. With jaw set I pluck them ruthlessly, realizing I’ll soon be browless at this rate. What then? I have no idea. Thankfully, the mirror is minute enough to keep me from cataloging all the other marks of age upon my body. Today, it’s just the brows.

Tomorrow it might be something else, especially if I have given in to my secret online obsession with celebrity slideshows. Particularly the “Where Are They Now?” slides, documenting actors’ unforgiveable lapses into middle and old age. How dare our movie icons age like that? The disgust is palpable. Those galleries are usually linked to celebrities trying to escape the ignominy of aging, who end up instead in the next slideshow: “The Worst Plastic Surgeries Ever.”

Who wants to age, really? We fight it in so many ways, some of which are downright silly. Recently I saw an enticing online headline that had gone viral: “The Hairstyle That Will Get a 38-Year-Old Carded.”

I clicked on it, of course. There she was: a woman obviously in her late thirties, peering goofily from behind long, blunt bangs once popular among tweens and teens. At least they weren’t pigtails! But this obsession is hardly new. Remember Twiggy, the seventeen-year-old supermodel-waif from the sixties, who suddenly made mature women everywhere long to look eleven years old?

Are we so youth-obsessed that we long to be children again? Perhaps. Who wouldn’t love another chance at childhood, to do it right and thorough with the proper joy next time? But maybe all this is more than the

universal human hunt for the fountain of youth and innocence. Maybe it's something more modest, more possible. Maybe we older women just want to be seen again.

In 2013, *Salon* ran a provocative article by Tira Harpaz with the headline "Women over 50 Are Invisible." The essay made significant waves among women over fifty but was, predictably, ignored by others. The author's thesis was simply this: "If you want to make a person invisible, just put her in the shoes of an over-fifty woman and abracadabra, watch her disappear."¹ Harpaz, herself in her late fifties, described aging and its accompanying invisibility as a kind of fading away into irrelevance, including "a loss of attractiveness and sex appeal, the end of fertility, a glimpse of a slow, lingering decline."

I will not entirely deny this. And, I am told, even women just over forty begin to feel it. One Sunday after church, I was talking to a friend about this book, which began as *The Happy over Fifty Women's Guide to the Best Half of Our Lives*. She said, "Oh no. I need this book. I'm forty-three and I'm feeling it already. Invisible. Not young anymore. People look right through me now." I stared at her, not looking through her, but remembering myself at that age. She was right. When I hit forty, I noticed it as well, though I assumed I was erased from the roster of "those who matter" because I often had a river of children streaming behind me. Motherhood does indeed usher us out of the rooms of power and status, but age accomplishes this far more effectively. So this book opened further, wider.

You will not hear a litany of laments here, however, nor even many complaints. Not even from Win Couchman in her essay, "The Grace to Be Diminished," where she describes finally giving up her car keys and her independence. Most of us are too busy for complaints. The day I plucked my gray brows, I climbed a mountain here in Kodiak. I started up the trail slowly, admiring the spruce trees arrowed to the sun, the peregrine falcons and bald eagles kiting the vast sky over the ocean. I reached the summit an hour later, panting but legs muscled and strong. Just a few miles to the east, close enough for me to touch, it felt, stood the Three Sisters, three steep, trenched peaks. I see them often, but standing there that day, I saw them anew, admiring their stolid immovability.

How many raging Alaska storms had they survived? I knew it was those very storms, and time itself, that had adorned those slopes with their majestic patterns of erosion.

I'm not crazy about erosion on my own face, but I thought about women ahead of me, women I admire who are two and three decades older than I: Doris with her glowing red hair and killer figure. Luci with two new books coming out this year; Vera who still teaches dance classes; Kay, still speaking around the world. I thought of Iris Apfel draped in turquoise or orange with layers of massive jewelry lighting her tiny figure. When she attended Paris Fashion Week, she was treated like a combination of a rock star and Queen Elizabeth. She is drop-dead gorgeous. And she is ninety-four. And not least among them, Merle with her servant's heart and generosity to all.

All of these women are well past eighty. I am agog not at their age; there are plenty of nonagenarians and even centenarians knocking around. But a ninety-four-year-old setting new fashion trends? A ninety-ish woman who is still making new friends? An eighty-eight-year-old still creating stunning poetry? An eighty-three-year-old opening fresh biblical truths to hungry audiences? Beauty and age have too long been enemies and antitheses. But times are changing. And so are we. Dozens of models over sixty grace fashion runways and magazine covers, flaunting their wrinkles, wearing their gray hair long and flowing as they pose elegantly among women young enough to be their granddaughters. Even in this dizzying technological age, which prizes the nimblest brains and the quickest adapters, we women over forty are proving again and again that innovation and imagination can flower all the way into our nineties.

Even more than this, as I look around my faith community, I see older women serving. I see them beginning new ministries after their retirement, finding new ways to alleviate suffering and lighten others' loads. Here are the real radicals, women who reject the prevailing notion of our culture that age delivers a license for freedom and self-indulgence. How many times have I heard celebrities and acquaintances alike, on the eve of their fiftieth or sixtieth birthday, proclaim to the world, "Watch out. It's my time now. I'm gonna say and do whatever I want." And in the next breath, when asked for their newfound wisdom,

they invariably say something like, “I’ve finally come to love myself just as I am. Now I don’t have to please anyone but myself.” Is that really all there is? Did we survive childhood, adolescence, and our twenties and thirties to arrive on the doorstep we left as children? Surely not.

I’m not saying aging is a breeze. Vanities and losses remain, I confess. This book is something of a coming out for me. I’ve vacillated over the last few decades about making my age public. Sometimes I deliberately hide my age or even lie. A few months ago, I changed my date of birth on Facebook to a full decade younger, thinking, *Why not? Why should I reveal that I’m almost a senior citizen?* I speak to university audiences often and would rather *not* be perceived as their mother or, worse, their grandmother. But it didn’t stand long before I was spasmed by guilt and tried to change it back, only to find the date uneditable. (It seems you can only change your age twice before the FB police come after you.)

Like many others, sometimes I am mistaken for someone ten or even fifteen years younger, given good lighting and the just-right dress. But other times it cuts the other way, which feels like the ultimate defeat. But why?

Why do we feel as though we’re racing against time? And as if time were not an inequitable enough racing partner, some of us, mostly subconsciously, lace up our shoes next to photoshopped magazine cover models who regularly go under the needle and the laser, who work out four hours a day with their personal trainer, nibbling salads devised by their personal chefs. For a few, their own postmenopausal youthfulness has become their single *raison d’être*.

It’s a rigged, impossible race. Mostly, we know it. Our best claim, then, is to look or feel younger than our actual age. Here, finally, we’re crowned a winner in the lifestyle sweepstakes, which is not so much about cheating death—we’re not concerned with that . . . yet. But to cheat time itself, and even more, to cheat nature, which, by the time we’re over forty, we know for sure is not our mother.

How then do we respond to the passing years that make their inevitable marks upon our faces, our bodies, and our abilities? A thousand different ways. For me, my life is still expanding. I turn sixty this year and never have I felt so alive. As I write this, I’m working on two books,

packing for a research trip to Europe, and getting ready to fly to fish camp, where I'll work in commercial fishing all summer (but I won't work in the boats much, conceding to the limits of my body). This is not to say, "Look at me," but rather, look at you. Look around. Look and listen to these forty women, most of whom are just like you and me, women who are growing, beginning new ventures, casting off old shadows, whose own passages through life and time have yielded great fruit, even when aging saps health, energy, and abilities. Yes, even then. Welcome to the party!

But we're serious, too. Aging is not for the thin-boned or the faint of heart. As we climb year by year, whether it's a mountain or a ladder, we need to stop for a long moment and consider the view. We need to ask questions. Maybe we should even check our ladder. As a number of writers have told us, we could spend our entire lives climbing the ladder of achievement and success only to discover, once we mount those upper rungs, that we've leaned the ladder against the wrong wall. It takes courage to stop and take stock of who we are, where we've been, and where we're going. It takes strength to keep our hearts open. It takes fearlessness to keep questing after the good, the beautiful, the true. We'll do exactly that in these pages, knowing that no matter our age, it's never too late to keep becoming the women God wants us to be.

These are indeed the Wonder Years. In writing and compiling this book, I have been astonished and inspired by my fellow writers. I know you will be as well, but we have another audience in mind too. We're taking up the mantle the apostle Paul gave us in Titus 2:3-5, for "older women" to "teach what is good" to "younger women." All of us in these middle and later years have gained a storehouse of memories and experiences that surprise us in their depth and breadth. We find ourselves, unexpectedly at times, experts in a whole host of areas: We're mothers and grandmothers, wives, mothers-in-law, and stepmothers. We're professionals. We're farmers and fisherwomen. We're pastors, writers, teachers, ministry leaders. As we have learned, stumbled, and grown, we must pass on all that is good and true to those coming behind us. Many of us had no such encouraging voices as we lurched through our own earlier years. We send these notes on to you,

our younger sisters, with joy and love. We commit ourselves to easing your passage as well!

How shall we do this, then? Our lives seldom divide into neat packages, but the three sections of this book make enormous sense to all of us in our “years of wonder.” Along with the passage of time comes courage, a wise sort of adventuring that knows how fleet is the passage of time and how ripe the moment for new experiences, so we begin with “Firsts.” The wisdom that launches us into new ventures also relieves us of burdens and obligations we no longer need to carry. The next section is “Lasts,” where fourteen women cast off the weight of regret, fear, judgments, and perfectionism. Finally, though we’re constantly changing and growing through the embrace of the new and the loss of the old, we arrive as well at our “Always” convictions. We discover again the core of who we are and who we vow to remain, no matter our health, our abilities, or our age.

Welcome to the Wonder Years! Get ready for breakout joy, indulgent abundance, heart-stopping wisdom, and never-let-go faith!

Notes

1. Tira Harpaz, “Women over 50 Are Invisible,” Salon.com, April 5, 2013, https://www.salon.com/2013/04/05/wanna_know_what_its_like_to_disappear_try_being_a_woman_over_50_partner/.



Firsts

It is never too late to be what you might have been.

GEORGE ELIOT

What is possible for us in our forties, fifties, sixties, seventies, and beyond? Sometimes we need reminding. Consider the oldest woman in this section, **Luci Shaw**, who embarks on her first wilderness canoeing trip in her early seventies, paddling all day in the waters off British Columbia, often in heavy rain, and camping at night on rocky shores. The youngest here, **Lauren Winner**, embarks on a decidedly inward adventure, paving the way for risks and journeys of another sort entirely. **Charity Singleton Craig** gets married for the first time at age forty-two, changing the way she thinks about her body. **Amy R. Buckley** and her mother, surviving a divorce and a death, find themselves dating again at the same time, to hilarious (and sobering) effect. When her great-aunt becomes ill, **Laura Lynn Brown** pulls up stakes and moves to a new city to take care of her. **Sheila Wise Rowe** packs up her family and moves to South Africa to start a challenging ministry.

Then there are stories of the new creatures that enter our lives: **Elisa Morgan**, a dog-fearer, suddenly adopts two enormous dogs and finds her life enlarged by double. **Heather MacLaren Johnson** buys a horse farm at age forty-four and by fifty becomes an accomplished equestrian. When struck with dystonia, nearly immobilizing her, **Michelle Novak** gains a

new kind of sight—and a yard full of astonishing creatures she had never seen before.

Our new capacities often surprise us, and God himself surprises us often. **Jill Kandel** writes for twenty years, following what she thought was the call of God, without publishing until age fifty-nine, when everything changes. **Jennifer Dukes Lee** finds assurance in God's cupped hands and simultaneously learns how to wean a calf. Best-selling writer **Brené Brown** repents of her dismissal of feminine handcrafts and "creativity" and joins her first art class.

A few of us have done something with our newly sagging bodies. **Amy K. Sorrells** chooses to embrace health and joy. For me, upon turning fifty, I bought my first padded bra (leopard spotted, of course).

In this kickoff section, there's no one single party line. You'll find convincing support to slow down, to speed up, to launch out into new places, ministries, relationships, and ideas. Prepare to be inspired!



Jennifer Dukes Lee

Jennifer is the author of *The Happiness Dare* and *Love Idol*. She is a storyteller and a grace dweller, blogging about faith at jenniferdukeslee.com. She is also on the writing team for DaySpring's (in)courage. A journalist at heart, she used to cover crime, politics, and natural disasters as a news reporter for several Midwestern metropolitan daily newspapers. Now she uses her reporting skills to chase after the biggest story ever: the redemptive story of Christ. She and her husband raise crops, pigs, a herd of cats, and two humans on the Lee family farm in Iowa.



Cupped Hands

*You don't think your way into a new kind of living.
You live your way into a new kind of thinking.*

HENRI | . M. NOUWEN

I rest my chin on our farm gate and puff out a breath of frustration. Two Angus calves with saucerlike eyes stare back at Lydia and me. On this June morning, we are chin-deep in a showdown at dawn.

These cows simply won't budge, refusing to drink from their buckets. The water's skin flutters when a lone fly drops in for a landing.

Lydia and I cajole the calves with mothering voices. Lydia chirps a rhyming tune:

*Sherbet and Daisy,
Don't be la-zyyyy!
Come drink from your pail of waaaa-ter!*

Content taken from *Love Idol: Letting Go of Your Need for Approval and Seeing Yourself Through God's Eyes* by Jennifer Dukes Lee. Copyright © 2014. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. All rights reserved.

But those two unyielding black calves with wet noses simply blink long eyelashes at us. I scuff at the dirt with the toe of my boot.

What they say about horses is also true for cows: You can lead them to water, but you can't make them drink.

Lydia wears worry in a knot above her brow. Her shoulders tense up with an unspoken question: *Will these calves ever learn to drink from a bucket?* Lydia kneels down, swirling the water into figure eights with her index finger. I lean beside her, rubbing reassurance into her back with tiny circles.

"It's okay, hon. We'll try again tomorrow, all right?"

Our chore pail, hidden from the calves behind the hay bales, holds two supersized bottles—the kind you'd buy if you were raising a baby Goliath or a newborn Bigfoot. Until the calves learn to drink water and eat starter feed from buckets, they will nurse from these bottles. We had hoped they wouldn't be needed today, but the calves are winning this battle of wills.

Lydia's resignation tumbles out of her mouth with a heaving sigh. She relents and marches for the hidden bottles. With her jaw clenched, she grabs a bottle of milk replacer to feed Sherbet; I take one for Daisy. We hold the bottles through an opening in the farm gate, bracing ourselves as the calves lunge at us, full tilt. These baby brutes are ravenous, like Augustus Gloop lurching toward Willy Wonka's chocolate river.

The county fair is eight weeks away. By then, the calves must be weaned. One of these graceless, 120-pound beasts will, theoretically, learn to walk behind her 55-pound surrogate mother, Miss Lydia Lee. Using a rope halter—a kind of leash for bovines—Lydia will lead Sherbet or Daisy around the 4-H show ring on a late July afternoon.

Or so we hope.

It all looks a little daunting at this point. Through the farm gate, these calves tug at their bottles with slobbering mouths. Within minutes, they drain the bottles dry and beg for more with pleading, blinking eyes.

I look down at Lydia and reassure her, "They'll learn. They'll wean eventually."

I speak with the calm confidence of someone who knows what she's doing. But it's slippery confidence and—*snap*—just like that, it's gone.

An old familiar ache rises up as I hear a sneering reproach in my head.

It goes like this: *Woman, admit it: Here's yet another farm chore that's beyond you.*

It's just a small thought—inconsequential, really. But it's right here, in these maddeningly mundane moments, that old insecurities like to make unannounced visits.

My husband—the real farmer on this farm—is helping me learn to be gentle with myself. He encourages me to try new things, like bottle-feeding calves with our daughters, even though I sometimes feel like a clumsy and inadequate farmwife.

He simply laughs and shakes his head when I retell the story of how I got myself and Daisy tangled up with the rope halter. The rope is supposed to fit over the calf's head. But I somehow slipped it on backward, and it wound itself around the calf's neck. Meanwhile, the other end of the rope circled both of my knees and one of Daisy's legs. We eventually got ourselves untangled, and while I can safely say that no animals were harmed in the making of this paragraph, my pride might have been a bit bruised. Yet Scott's good-natured response to my foible reminds me how God looks at us—“in process” and lovable, despite our mistakes.

Without regularly reminding myself of God's unquenchable love, I might be inclined to let my lousy insecurities tangle themselves like rope halters around my heart every time I make a mistake. My daughters might do the same.

Old idols are stubborn, showing up in innocent places like calf pens—exactly as they did in my grade school classrooms, corporate cubicles, and department store dressing rooms during swimsuit season. I do realize that at times the Love Idol—that desire to be loved and approved by the world—still slithers up beside me to hiss its lies into my ears, especially when I'm lacking confidence in my performance. This recognition is a victory in its own right. But still, I wish the Love Idol were permanently silenced.



Two calves' tails twitch. Wide, begging eyes plead, *More*.

Both bottles have been sucked dry. Defeated, Lydia and I walk up the hill to wash before breakfast. Just as these calves will one day be weaned, God is weaning me.

In the mudroom, I turn on the faucet and wash bottles. Milky water swirls down the drain.

It feels like a sort of inner cleansing, an act of faith, to stand here at the sink, watching dirty water drain away. It's an inner turning, a refocusing, a flipping over.

I have to remind myself daily what I already know: Focus on the Father, not on the flaws. Look to the Savior, not the self. The Messiah, not the mirror. This is the power of the gospel: Water cleanses, through the Word.

I feel victorious in Jesus, having made the conscious choice to drink from Living Water instead of the bottled praise of humankind. Yes, "like a weaned child is my soul within me" (Psalm 131:2 NLT).

A patient Father can lead his child to water, but he doesn't make her drink it. He holds water out, as if in cupped hands. He bids her, *Come and drink*.

And at the edge of this sink, where all the grime has drained away, I drink again from those hands. I sing back to the Father, and I look full in the Savior's wonderful face, soaking in the beauty. I repeat memorized Scripture about who I am, about how I've been fashioned by God, created to do good works that will bring his kingdom glory, here below. There is no earthly yardstick, rating system, ticker, or scale to measure that sort of worth.

The water runs clean, and I can feel it now—how when I've shifted my focus, anxiety drains away. This is what I have been learning and relearning: Look upward, not inward.

It's real. And it's really changing everything.

The Lord didn't ask for us to prove our significance to the world. Or to prove ourselves to him. He didn't ask us to prove anything at all. *He* is the one who approves, declaring us beloved. Christ asks again for our whole hearts and our willingness to drink living water from his cupped hands.

Just then, it dawns on me. *My hands*. I turn off the faucet and call for Lydia. “Come quick, honey! I’ve got an idea. I think I know how to wean Sherbet and Daisy.”

She pulls on her boots again, and I tell her what we’ll try. She’s giddy with hope, giggling a stream of joy all the way back down the hill. The gravel crunches under our boots. A barn swallow swoops overhead. The morning breeze whistles in our ears.

The gate creaks open with an easy push, and we call out for the calves. “Sherbet, Daisy!” They peek out the barn door with those blinking saucer eyes.

“Will it work, Mom?” Lydia asks. “Will it work this time?”

I bend down on my knees beside a five-gallon bucket. Two calves step closer, curious and tentative.

I dip both my hands into the tepid water. If they won’t come to the water, then I can bring the water to them. I lift my cupped hands, filled with water, like a chalice. I inch forward on my knees, with those hands held out as an invitation, and then I slip water under the wet nose of one still-thirsty calf.

And right then—from cupped hands stretched out on an early morning, in this common place where God’s glory slides like gold across the water’s surface—it happens. A baby learns to drink.