
MOTHER TERESA AND THE CRAZY OLD LADY

Wisdom begins in wonder.

—Socrates, in Plato's *Theatetus*

I was about to turn fifty years of age. Life was good. I had a job I liked, working with people I enjoyed, and I had time to study and learn and think—my true passions. My marriage was good and getting better. How wonderful to be in love with the man I married. Plenty of money was coming in, and we were living the high life with fancy dinners, exotic trips, nice cars, a lovely home, and all the shoes I wanted.

However, there were worries: my children were struggling to find their ways in adulthood; I wondered what was next for my career; Mark was deciding whether to undergo an arduous medical treatment. There were stressors: aging parents, intermittent family discord, work pressures. Nevertheless, it was a great time in my life.

Still, I was turning fifty. Underneath this active and fruitful life, I feared growing old and losing my youth. What would it mean for me? Physical and health changes, the sense that some experiences had passed me by, the years lost to fear and sadness, my late start on happiness—these concerns played around in my mind. What would it be like to be old? How can a woman live when she is no longer seen as attractive and desirable? How does a person bear the loss of hope for the future?

I had no natural models. My mother died at age forty-seven. Her mother gave up on life at age forty-five when her husband died. After that, she lived in our house, sitting in her room all day, only leaving for church on Sunday morning, until she died in her early sixties. She never smiled. My father's mother was a different story, but one I didn't know very well since she wasn't around much. She lived to be seventy years old and appeared to enjoy life, but she was a butterfly, always moving from place to place and occasionally passing our way. She was never close to me emotionally or geographically.

So, that was the context I was in when I turned fifty.

My husband and I were on our way to Nice, France, for a week's vacation, one of our favorite places in the world. We landed at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York for a layover. We are both pretty good travelers, and we travel well together, but there are a few little things we don't do so well together—like wait. He prefers to wait in comfortable executive lounges with televisions, newspapers, and free items. I like to wait at the gates or in the terminals where there's more to see, and I can move around. I'm really bored in those executive rooms.

Mark and I almost never argue, and I am fairly easy-going, but for some reason, on this day, I just got totally infuriated with his insisting that we wait in the executive lounge. We argued; I got huffy and stormed out of there.

I'm all in my huff, walking down the concourse when I see a group of people coming in my direction. I know even from this distance that the little woman in the wheelchair is Mother Teresa, the person I admire most in the all the world.

I have a tendency to be a little shy and respectful of people's privacy, so I miss any opportunity to connect with celebrities. I spent a couple of hours in a museum one time, aware that Diane Keaton was walking around near me, but I never spoke to her. I figured she came to see the art, not to be bothered by fans. I would liked to have said I met her, but I was sure meeting me was not a big deal to her, so I left her alone. The same thing happened another time when I ate dinner in a barbeque place at the table next to Joni Mitchell. I was content this day in the airport to leave Mother Teresa alone, too. It was enough to be in her presence.

However, when our paths crossed on the concourse, she reached out, touched my hand, and said, "Give me your blessing, my child." I later learned that this was her usual greeting to those she encountered, because she saw herself in need of the blessings of the most ordinary of people.

I said nothing. I was too stunned by her radiance. I do not exaggerate when I say that she glowed. I was so thrilled to see her that I wanted nothing more. However, as the entourage passed, one of the nuns with her said to me, "I'm sorry, Mother Teresa is out of her medallions."

I did not have a clue what she meant, but I smiled and said, "That's all right. I'm just so happy to see her."

I dashed back to tell Mark my story, my huff dissolved. You'd have to know him to really appreciate this, but he said, "Well, you have to have the medallion." And off he went to solve that problem. In a few minutes he returned, medallion in hand, having found Mother Teresa and her group in a private waiting area. He talked one of the nuns into parting with her

personal medallion.

I learned that Mother Teresa frequently passed along small, metal Mary Miraculous medallions to people as a symbol of God's love. I've heard stories that these medallions have even saved lives, like the policeman who carried his in his shirt pocket and says it stopped a gunman's bullet that was headed for his heart. Now I glowed with the radiance of gratitude and blessing.

But, life and travel move on. We got on our plane and continued our trip to France.

In Nice, we stayed at a little hotel on the Promenade des Anglais. We began going across the street to a private beach every day. In Nice and most of the Cote d'Azur (French Riviera), beaches are divided into private and public sections. Private beaches have wooden walkways, lounge chairs, waiters, and great French food, wine, and coffee. You pay a pretty hefty fee to be there, but it's very pleasant and worth it if you want to be pampered. In Nice, at least, public beaches have rocks. Some other places in the south of France have sand beaches, but not Nice. The beach is made up of round rocks about three to four inches in diameter that really hurt your feet to walk on. People bring towels or mats to lie on and maybe a baguette and wine. A rope, such as what is used in a theater, divides the public and private beaches, so the view is unobstructed.

From our private beach, I began to notice a woman on the public beach. I thought she might be crazy. Each day, she arrived with her mat and shopping bags. She disrobed to her bikini bottom and began doing yoga. When she completed her asanas, she walked the rocky beach for a while, went for a swim, and then packed up and left. She was old, maybe eighty, very thin, very tan, and very fit; she had wild gray hair. But there was something that drew me to her, and I began to watch for her every day.

As luck would have it, my husband and I became acquainted with an American woman who also came frequently to this private beach. She was married to a French physician and had lived in Nice for twenty years. We enjoyed her company; she was very helpful with information about the area and food tips. She introduced me to mesclun, the wonderful, wild field green salad, popular in the South of France, and my husband to steak tartare, which I would never eat in a million years, but Mark loved it.

One day, as we were chatting with our new friend, the *crazy lady* came to the beach. I mentioned that I was quite curious about her, and my friend said, "Oh, I know her, and she's fascinating. She is a famous sculptress; her work is widely known around the world and very popular in France. She is also a lady with a past. She was once Picasso's mistress, and the only woman who survived loving him. She comes here every day for her spiritual practice.

Isn't she wonderful?"

And, then, I could see that she was wonderful. What I labeled in my mind as *crazy* was in fact her authenticity. She was living her life fully and in tune with herself, rather than with my notions of proper maturity.

And I had my answer to the question of what would it be like to be old. The answer? Any way I wanted it to be. I could be kind, generous, inspiring, creative, strong, bold, or anything else I desired to be and dared to live. I could love my body, even when it was wrinkled. I could think of others and radiate love from a wheelchair, if need be.

There is an old proverb that says this: *when the student is ready, the teacher appears*. Mother Teresa and the *crazy old lady* were precisely where I needed them to be at exactly the right time.

My trip to France came to an end, my fiftieth birthday came and went, along with others that followed, but I had been changed by these chance encounters. Two women—so different from each other but each living as themselves—became my guides on the journey, not as models of *what* to be, but as models of *how* to be at any age.

*It is not true that people stop pursuing dreams because they grow old;
they grow old because they stop pursuing dreams.*

—Gabriel Garcia Marquez, author of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature