

# [***Opinion: The sweet surrender of aging with the one you love***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B9T-7XV1-JBSS-S007-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; **Editor's note**: [*Joan Lester*](https://www.joanlester.com), PhD, a PEN-Josephine Miles award winner for her memoir "Loving Before Loving: A Marriage in Black and White," is at work on a novel. The views expressed in this commentary are her own. Read [*more opinion*](https://www.cnn.com/opinions) at CNN

"Come grow old with me, the best is yet to be, the last of life, for which the first was made."

It was 1981 when my new love Carole shyly handed me a framed poster of this Robert Browning quote. Charmed as I was by the poetry and confirmation of her long-term intentions, I cast a skeptical eye at her gift: How could anything be better than our passionate, new love?

Our hormones surging, we couldn't get enough of each other's unfamiliar bodies or intriguing minds. Carole was a child of the Midwest, a serious runner, skier and softball player, an athlete who'd hit tennis balls for hours every day as a teen - years when all I'd wanted to do was read or ride in cars with boys. Now Carole, immersed in lesbian culture, was an evening law student intent on practicing civil rights law.

I, an Easterner and twice-divorced mother, a doctoral student moonlighting as a community college teacher, wasn't even aware a lesbian culture existed. Focused on raising my kids and my studies in multicultural education, I was squeaking by with Section 8 housing assistance for my budget apartment.

Yet from such different backgrounds, Carole and I found much in common. Both activists talking civil rights and gender ***politics*** nonstop, we were madly, eagerly in love.

My alarmed teens complained, "Ma, you can't be a lesbian. What will my friends say?" Carole's lesbian housemates, equally concerned, warned, "Joan's straight, she's experimenting, she'll drop you."

Still, we made it through those early stormy years, moved across country to California once my kids grew up and settled into married life long before it was legal. We bought one house, then another. Kept our same jobs. The decades passed, the hormones subsided, and here we are happily trundling along, Carole in her mid-70s, me in my 80s.

Every life stage has its joys and challenges. Yes, those early years were exciting, rolling around in bed with intense spasms of desire or exploring foreign cities hand-in-hand, eyes wide with wonder. Yet an unparalleled sweetness sings deep in the bones now after nearly half a century of committed love.

We've had much to celebrate over these years: The elections of President Bill Clinton and then - cheering in the streets! - President Barack Obama. Three grandchildren thriving to adulthood, fanning out on grown-up adventures. Our own workplace successes. Neighborhood gatherings. Friends' birthdays, anniversaries and healing moments.

We've been fully stress-tested, too, with the deaths of beloved parents, a sibling and friends. We've suffered through a daughter's estrangement and surgeries where survival was no certainty, followed by months of weakness.

We emerged from each trial more devoted and securely attached, loyal to the bone. The only love I can compare it to is that of a mother for a child, yet in that relationship one grows up and away from the other. In this time-proven love, even as we flourish independently we keep twining ourselves more closely around each other. It's a mystery I experience daily: the deep satisfaction of our two solitudes when we meditate or work or hike alone, and the even deeper joy of our togetherness.

Each evening we luxuriate in candlelight dinners, no matter our simple fare, and talk over our day, with its questions, struggles and delights. Later, spooning in bed -"I can't lie on that shoulder, it hurts too much, can you turn toward me?" - we savor the comfort, the security of each other's warm, familiar bodies as we squeeze together.

"Don't be a stranger," I joke with Carole pressed against my back. "I'm not!" she laughs in reply. The knowledge that our days together are finite - always true but not as evident in our younger years - surely is one reason for this exceptional sweetness.

The strains of living have burnt off the dross until all that's left is goodness. I want only the best for Carole's every moment and would do anything to support her achieving her life's goals. She demonstrates the same for me, day by day.

Even if we could go back and relive those dramatic early years - out dancing late into the night, pitying our parents' pathetic 9 o'clock bedtimes - I wouldn't trade these current moments of liquid honey, when the pleasure of holding Carole's old hand in mine surpasses any peace I've known.

How fortunate we are to have it all: our memories of wild sex, exploring Paris and gawking at Amsterdam art. And now, the pleasure of watching red tulips streaked with yellow open on our sunny table. Or appreciating a full moon like one we recently saw, bright globe shining behind a mist. Arms around each other's waists we stared in wonder before we ducked inside, laughed at an Australian comedy series, and snuggled up in bed.

Yes, at 9. I can't imagine anything better.

Opinion by Joan Lester

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