

## GUEST ESSAY

## I Just Turned 60, but I Still Feel 22

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**By Margaret Renkl**

Ms. Renkl is a contributing Opinion writer who covers flora, fauna, politics and culture in the American South.

NASHVILLE — I was already in college before I finally understood that my entire life had overlapped with second-wave feminism, a force that transformed American culture without so much as registering on a certain young woman in Alabama. All my life I had been stepping through open doors, it turned out, blithely unaware of the vision and sacrifice and passionate persistence of the women who had opened those doors for me.

Once I understood that, I also understood that I wouldn't want to have landed on this planet a single moment earlier than I did.

A woman born in Lower Alabama in 1961 has little use for nostalgia. Go back to the “good old days” when women were limited to professions like education and nursing and little else? Back to a time when the opportunities available to Black and brown people, and to Black and brown women especially, were even more profoundly limited? No, thank you very much.

The only trouble with being born in 1961 is that in 2021 you turn 60, something I did last week. It's very strange to persist in feeling 22, even as every mirror — and every storefront window and polished elevator door — reveals the truth. Sixty is the point at which people must admit they are no longer middle-aged.

Lately it's been dawning on me that I would not want to have been born even one minute later than 1961, either. Last week I mentioned this new thought to a friend, and her response was immediate, as though she'd already had it herself: “Because we won't have to live through the cataclysm?”

Exactly.

Well, no, not *exactly*. On the days when headlines are full, yet again, with firestorms and catastrophic flooding and biodiversity collapse and endless pandemic and a depressingly effective disinformation campaign to deny the climate emergency — on those days, yes. Absolutely yes. On those days I am glad to be 60 because it means I almost certainly won't live to witness the cataclysm that is coming if humanity cannot change its ways in time.

But that's not the way I think on most days. On most days I am simply grateful for the 60 years I've had.

The joking birthday cards that start coming at 40 were funny 20 years ago because they were so far from reality. Now they're funny because they're so true. One of the cards I got last week featured a vintage photograph of plump women in swimsuits who looked remarkably like me in my swimsuit. “At your age, swimming can be dangerous,” the card read. “Lifeguards don't try as hard.”

I laughed so hard, my belly jiggled, a feature of being 60 that troubles me only a little. This is just who I am now, a person who looks exactly like her late mother, despite far more exercise and a far healthier diet. Besides, I loved my mother, and I love seeing her again in every store window I pass.

I feel lucky to have gotten to 60 despite a genetic propensity for cancer; despite the lingering effects of Covid, which will apparently dog me for the rest of my life; despite having survived other infections — strep, pneumonia — that might have killed me if not for the pure luck of being born after the invention of antibiotics. Many infectious diseases that used to kill people by the millions I never even had to worry about because I was lucky enough to have been born after the widespread availability of vaccines.

Sorrow in the face of aging would be a poor response to such good fortune.

Thanks to that immense, unwarranted luck, I have lived long enough to be surrounded by the truest possible friends. Sixty years have given me time to learn that true friendship comes not from proximity — attending the same schools or belonging to the same church or having children the same age or voting for the same political candidates. Friendship is forged across time, through good fortune and tragedy alike, and true friends are those who keep on loving one another even when it isn't convenient and even when they don't always agree.

I have lived long enough to have learned, too, that what is beautiful and joyful is almost always fleeting and must never be squandered. That rejection rarely bears any relationship to worth. That whatever else might separate us, sharing a love for “Ted Lasso” is enough common ground to start the harder conversations. That life is too short to wear uncomfortable shoes.

These are the same lessons the pandemic ought to have taught us, a life-and-death recognition of what truly matters. I can still hardly believe

it did not.

Maybe wisdom is just too much to ask of a culture in the grip of collective trauma. Maybe wisdom can be acquired only with time, even if time by itself is no guarantee. “Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise,” the Fool tells King Lear. So might he say to many of the old men now holding public office, and even more loudly to those no longer in office but still desperate to pull the levers of power.

A lifelong friend, one who will also turn 60 this year, sent me an email on my birthday. Her message contained a passage from “The Flower,” a poem by George Herbert: “Grief melts away / Like snow in May, / As if there were no such cold thing. / Who would have thought my shriveled heart / Could have recovered greenness?”

Who would have thought, indeed? But given enough time, we do go on, somehow. Like the stems and branches of springtime, our shriveled hearts can recover greenness, too. “And now in age I bud again,” Herbert wrote, and so it is with us.

With so many disasters upon us, calamity after calamity after calamity, a sentiment like that might sound like wishful thinking. And yet the accumulating decades almost always offer proof that fear and darkness do pass in time. Proof that hard work can open doors so wide, it later seems as though they had never been closed.

It is a great blessing and also a great curse that the hard work of a single generation can wipe out the widespread memory of lack, of pain, but mainly it is a blessing. It means that even now, all is not yet lost. The decades can teach us that, too.

Margaret Renkl, a contributing Opinion writer, is the author of the books “Graceland, at Last: Notes on Hope and Heartache From the American South” and “Late Migrations: A Natural History of Love and Loss.”

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