

# Coming into My Years: Preparations for the Last Third of Life

By Jeanne Mackey

*"I'm a gray-haired woman and I'm coming into my years  
I'm a weathered woman and I'm coming into my years  
No more holding back, no more trying to please  
I've got the strength and the will to get off of my knees  
I'm an aging woman and I'm coming into my years"*  
-- Betsy Rose

I was once asked to sing for a group of life-long peace activists, mostly gray-haired women over 50. While introducing "Coming into My Years," a celebration of aging, I mentioned that my friend Betsy had written the song on the occasion of turning 30. The women laughed. One of them might even have snorted. I was in my 30s at the time and felt mildly offended by their response. After all, I was reaching out as a sister who understood.

It's funny to think about it now, who I was then and who I have become: someone who could have been sitting in the audience. Each decade of my life has brought its lessons—revelations, whacks-upside-the head, marvelous discoveries. But believe me, sisters: I get it now. Ain't nothing like the real thing. I'm talkin' about Death, the big Kahuna.

This is a threshold time for me as I prepare to turn 60 in two years, moving from my middle years into the ranks of the "young-old." In my search for a roadmap, I encounter various cultural constructs about aging: old people as a burden on the next generation as their bodies and minds weaken, the butt of jokes, objects of pity. From indigenous cultures come images of old folks as respected elders, the repositories of wisdom. Then there are those who play against type—the Gray Panthers and Raging Grannies.

Certain themes emerge as I observe my own life changes and those of my long-time friends. We recognize the benefits of traveling lightly, and find ourselves in a sorting process. What are the keepsakes, material goods, habits, dreams, and relationships that serve us, and what needs to be shed or composted? There are various losses, ranging from the deaths of loved ones to diminishing physical ability and the loss of the outer trappings of an identity one has spent years accumulating. We seek comfort, from the shoes we wear to our sense of self. Life seems both simpler and more complex as we learn to hold contradictory truths. And there are rich opportunities to realign ourselves so as to live the rest of our days with greater freedom and authenticity.

I do not hold myself up as a model of graceful maturing. Those early signs were not particularly welcome: the invitation to join the AARP; the earnest Clean Water Action solicitor who offered me the senior discount as I contemplated donating. And don't let anyone tell you differently--having an older body is a drag. Sure, I still ride my bike to work, take hikes, and schlep heavy equipment for musical gigs. But my knees complain. After years of eating whatever I pleased, my metabolism has slowed, my digestive system is unpredictably delicate, and I have high cholesterol. My brain doesn't track dates anymore—I'm constantly mixing them up. A good night's sleep, that restorative pleasure I once took for granted, is elusive now. Menopause itself is an initiation that has brought me to my knees (the aforementioned creaky knees).

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In his book *A Year to Live: How to Live This Year As If It Were Your Last*, Stephen Levine talks about a funeral practice in India where the family carries the body of their loved one from the home to the sacred burning grounds, chanting all the way. Halfway through the procession, they stop and turn the litter. For the rest of the journey, the head of the deceased no longer faces the house from which she came, but the home that is her destination. Levine describes his own shift in orientation as he contemplates the end of his physical existence. It's a perspective that I would have found depressing or morbid in the past. Yet I am beginning to understand how that inner turning towards death can result in a realignment of one's life in service to greater authenticity.



Photo by Pattie Postel

Jeanne Mackey is a musician, community-builder and ecotherapist

My parents did their best to protect me from death. I attended my first funeral in my late 30s. The first time one of my friends lost a parent, I withdrew in shocked silence, unwilling to face the knowledge that I would one day suffer the same loss. But when Rena's mother died, I couldn't turn away. Rena was in my inner circle. Afterwards, she expressed what she had learned through her mother's dying. She mourned not only for her own loss, but for who her mother might have become if she had been born in another time, with access to the feminist movement or a good therapist. "Take an honest look at yourself, at the habits and beliefs you know need to change," Rena told me. "Do that work now. At some point, you will no longer have the necessary resources--the strength, clarity, or energy. At some point it will be too late." I felt the solemnity of her words, and realized that I had never considered the limits of self-improvement--that ultimately, in the words of Bruce Springsteen, "You got to learn to live with what you can't rise above."

Then came the phone call in 1991 from my dear friend Diane. It was one of those moments where you remember the exact location of the telephone, the sunlight on the bookcase in the basement apartment. "They found a spot on my lung, Jeanne," she said. "I'm scared." A year and a half later, she was gone.

By the time my own father died in 2002, death was no longer a stranger. I had gained some understanding of the phrase, "good life, good death." My dad lived a long, productive, and meaningful life that had touched many people. When the end came, he seemed ready, even willing.

There are other kinds of losses that accompany the aging process, such as the loss of certain illusions. The biggest illusion loss for me came when my partner and I moved to Ann Arbor in 1995. During twenty-five years in the Washington, D.C., area, I had made a good life for myself and had a strong sense of identity as a valued member of various communities. But I left the mirrors behind in D.C.—those reflections of positive regard from others that I had always used to counter my own harsh self-judgments. I was confident that I had internalized the support and appreciation over the years. But after a few months as a newcomer in Ann Arbor, I felt like a failure. If no one around me knew what I had to offer, I didn't seem to know it either. It was a shocking realization. I didn't hold the mirrors inside--or at least not strongly enough.

## Coming into My Years: Preparations for the Last Third of Life (continued)

Joseph Campbell once said, "Midlife is when you reach the top of the ladder and find that it was against the wrong wall." For some people, the wrong wall turns out to be a career or relationship. For me, it was an orientation. I have lived too much of my life from the outside-in, constantly analyzing and assessing how my actions would be seen by others. On some level, I was constantly trying to figure out if I was primarily good or bad. Inside that primitive system, developed in early childhood, there is only room for one answer--no gradations allowed. I had a ruthless inner critic that kept me in line, providing a running commentary on my every move, based on an unachievable standard of perfection. Small wonder that I mistrusted my own choices.

There's an Ashleigh Brilliant postcard on my bulletin board that reads, "How could I possibly have come this far and yet still have so far to go?" Personal growth has been my relentless, life-long pursuit. It started in the mid-70s when I found a skillful feminist psychotherapist who taught me how to speak my own truth and change lifelong patterns of behavior and belief. But it didn't stop there. Over the years, I have worked with a dizzying array of practitioners: acupuncture, Rosen bodywork, shamanic healing, craniosacral work, applied muscle testing, massage. And then there were the classes and lessons: yoga, voice, aerobics, shamanic journeying, Al-Anon, Chinese five elements theory, theatre games, tap dancing, meditation, Reiki, therapeutic writing. You could call me a self-improvement queen.

As I struggled to find solid ground in Ann Arbor, I sought spiritual guidance. Over the next ten years, I would devote myself to ongoing study and practice with two different spiritual teachers. In both cases, the experience was deeply enriching—and led to me to confront my own illusions. Ultimately, I had to face my reluctance to embrace full adulthood. I didn't just want a teacher or advisor. I wanted a parent whom I could trust more than I trusted myself. It was a hard lesson that I still forget sometimes. We are all beings of the human sort--some of us amazingly gifted, able to shift consciousness and make magic. And yet no human being, no matter how wise, can relieve me of the responsibility to determine what is true and best for me.

Over time, I found satisfying work, kindred spirits, musical compadres, and creative proj-



The author, at age 6, in her "princess" dress

ects in the Ann Arbor community. Once again, there were friends and colleagues to greet me when I went shopping at the food co-op or attended a fundraiser. The mirrors had returned. But I couldn't forget what happened when they weren't there. The lesson was too painful to contemplate repeating. Incorporating what I had learned required a major shift that I couldn't make without help. My instincts told me this help would not come primarily in human form. It was time to turn to the natural world and Death herself as my teachers.



Photo by Pattie Postel

A younger Jeanne Mackey, with a friend.

The invitation came in the form of a mailing from the School of Lost Borders, a group of wise souls who lead pan-cultural vision fasts and wilderness rites of passage in the Eastern Sierras. I had done a fast through the school in 1998. What drew me to this one was the theme: facing death in order to live more fully. It would be a four-day water-only solo fast in the desert, with structured group time before and after.

In May 2006, our group headed for the high desert of the Inyo Mountains. Our leaders, Meredith and Scott, told us that Inyo means 'Great Spirit Dwelling Place' to the native people of the region. We caravanned to a remote spot off a rocky dirt road and set up base camp. Over the next three days, we readied ourselves for solo time on the land, exploring the Mayan myth of the Great Ballcourt in the underworld.

In preparation, I sought out a place to make my home during the fast. I found my spot half-way up the side of a big hill, next to a juniper and two pinion trees with a clear view of the Eastern Sierras. Jonna, a doctor from Vermont, had chosen a spot on the next hill, so we agreed to be buddies during the four days in accordance with the School's longtime safety practice. Together, we made a small stone pile in the valley between us. Jonna would visit the stone pile each afternoon to leave a sign that she was OK, and I would come in the mornings.

Joseph Campbell once said, "Midlife is when you reach the top of the ladder and find that it was against the wrong wall."

Each person in our group honed a personal intention for their fast. Here is mine:

*"I am a woman who lives from the inside out, with a heart big enough to hold all my beautiful contradictions."*

It was a wish, a prayer, a kind of spell I hoped to weave.

When the big day finally came, we arose before dawn and formed a circle. One by one, we stepped into the center to be smudged and blessed. One by one, we stepped out into sacred space and time. As I hoisted my backpack, I prayed to open my heart to whatever came.

So what did come? Daily sightings of hawks, buzzards, blue birds, and lizards. Finding a perfectly formed obsidian arrowhead in the dust. Facing the boredom of no structure and nothing to distract from the droning of my own repetitive thoughts. Listening for a song that could call me back to my life. As suggested by our leaders, I consciously put my feet on the road that leads to my death, and pondered the big questions. When the monsters of my life show up, how do I face them? If I were to die tomorrow, what regrets would I have? Have I "made it good" with the people I care about?

On the second morning, it was my turn to visit the stone pile. This was my one responsibility to another human during the four days. If I didn't show up and leave a sign, Jonna would have to interrupt her solo time to come looking for me. As I made my way down the hill, thoughts of worry and self-doubt began to surface. *What if you can't find the stone pile? You have a lousy sense of direction. What a drag for Jonna if she comes this afternoon and there's no sign from you. What a loser you are!* Increasingly anxious and weak from lack of food, I searched for the stone pile but found nothing familiar in the terrain. Finally I climbed back to where I had started. Standing at my spot, I could see in the distance the bright red bandana that Jonna had tied to a branch to mark her place. I walked down the hill one last time, keeping the bandana in my view. My path led me directly to the stone pile.



Photo by Penny Rosenwasser

musician, singer, songwriter

The next morning I set my sights on the red bandana again and reached the stone pile with ease. It felt like a lesson about aligning with death so I could see the big picture and find my way. It was one of many powerful teachings. Two days later, as the sky began to lighten, I made offerings to the land and prepared to return to base camp. I felt the pull of a new life.

Incorporating the lessons of a vision fast into daily life is often the greatest challenge of all. Two years have passed since my time in the sacred mountains. It has been a rough ride, but a rewarding one. I am more comfortable now in my own skin, as I learn to embrace my own paradoxes. The inner judge is still there, but I hold her voice more lightly. A new voice is emerging, a compassionate witness or wise observer who leads me to greater trust in my own inner authority and connection with Spirit. And when I slip into old habits, I call myself back with the song that was given to me in the desert.

*I have the right to live  
I have the right to speak  
I have the right to stumble  
I have the right to shine*

*I have the right to hate  
I have the right to worry  
I have the right to freeze up  
I have the right to dance...*

*When I look at this lifetime  
There's some shame and regret  
Yet I'm loved and I've loved well  
I'm worthy of my own respect...*

*I have the right to live  
Fully 'til my good death  
I have the right to savor  
Life until my last breath!*

Personal growth has been my relentless, life-long pursuit. It started in the mid-70s when I found a skillful feminist psychotherapist who taught me how to speak my own truth and change lifelong patterns of behavior and belief.

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On Saturday, September 27, Jeanne Mackey, MSW, will facilitate a day-long workshop at the Michigan Friends Center entitled "What Are You Doing for the Rest of Your Life: A Retreat on Conscious Aging." For more information, call the Michigan Friends Center at (734) 475-1892 or visit [www.geocities.com/jmackey50](http://www.geocities.com/jmackey50).

*Jeanne Mackey's last article for the Community Journal appeared in the fall of 2008. It was called **Music, Healing and Transformation**, and it can be found on the Crazy Wisdom website at <http://www.crazywisdom.net/interviewpdf/mackey.pdf>.*

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