

The Running Life: Just a Number

How running changes the way we think about aging

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My grandmother, who added new dimension to the word eccentric, insisted that her grandchildren call her by her given name, June. In rare moments of affection she would deign to let us call her June June. Never, under threat of banishment or removal from her will, were we allowed to call her Grandmother, or any derivation thereof. No Granny, G-Ma, Mimi, Meme, Bubbie, Nana, or Gran. To acknowledge that relationship would be to reveal her general age, something she would simply not stand for. My guess is that her last three husbands (there were five at final count) didn't have a clue as to what birthday she was celebrating each year. My mother has followed in her general footsteps, if not in total lockstep, then at least philosophically. She would rather have a root canal than reveal her age. The women in my family are blessed with remarkable genetic material. My grandmother, who we think was 98 when she died, looked chic and youthful to the end. If I were allowed to tell you how old my mother is, you would accuse me of lying and swear she was 15 years younger. Yet these beautiful, vigorous, active women lived in fear of a number, a number that defined them in the eyes of everyone they encountered.

Society, even in 2006, is hard on older people. We are a culture that reveres youth. We pursue what is new, what is of the moment, the next fresh thing. Americans tend to marginalize people as they age out of the coveted 18-34 demographic. For women, the process of growing old is doubly charged. As men age, they often gain the aura of gravitas, of wisdom, of power. Women, whether they are political leaders, CEOs, housewives, or socialites, have traditionally been defined to a large extent by how they look. When was the last time the media commented on what George Bush was wearing or his most recent haircut? And yet we are routinely informed of the fashion and cosmetic faux pas made by Senator Hillary Clinton and Dr. Condoleezza Rice. If you are a woman, looks matter.

I have a friend, a woman who is a generation older than I. She once told me that when she hit middle age she began to disappear. After sixty, she warned me, most people don't even notice you anymore. "It's depressing," she said, "to be so totally unseen. But it's also freeing." As a woman in my prime, her warning meant little to me. As I entered my 40s, however, I finally was able to feel the impact of her words. For women there is a degree of power that diminishes with age. Without power, people lose their importance, their influence, their visibility.

Certainly, things are changing: society is evolving. More and more women are occupying positions of authority and influence. Still, most women become increasingly marginalized as they age, the cultural currency of youth, beauty, and sexuality diminishing with each passing year.

Women can strive to make themselves smarter, stronger, or wealthier in pursuit of power past middle age, but the one thing they cannot do is reconnect with their original power base by getting younger. Facelifts won't do it; clothes won't do it. No form of artifice or contrivance will turn back the clock. Old is old and there's nothing you can do about it.

Or is there? The simple act of running has allowed me and many women and men like me to maintain vitality, a vibrant physicality that belies chronological age. At a recent party I looked around the room. Several of the guests were from my running group. Though everyone at the party was close in age, we middle-aged runners looked noticeably different than our non-running counterparts. The benefits of the running life were obvious, often dramatically so. We were leaner, straighter in stature, and bouncier in stride.

"You're one of those running people I see in the morning, right?" one woman asked me. "I wish I could do that."

"But you can do that," I told her emphatically.

"Not me," she replied without hesitation. "I'm too old."

This from a woman who was at least 10 years my junior.

Recently my 21-year-old son ran his first road race, a local 5K at his former high school. Though we had made plans to run together, when we went to register he found a group of classmates who had scattered across the country after graduation. "Go with them and we'll see each other at the finish," I told him and made my way to the start. As in most races, I eventually found my own pace and lost myself in the rhythm of footfalls and labored breathing. Pushing hard at the end, I crossed the finish surrounded by the most part by runners less than half my age.

Because the race was small and dominated by younger runners, I finished second in my age group. I also managed to come in well ahead of my son and his friends. As we gathered for the awards ceremony, it occurred to me that my ability as a runner conferred status in their eyes: I was respected for what my body could still do. If I had been cheering from the sidelines, they wouldn't have given me a second thought. But as a runner, no matter my age, I was made visible.

There are times when running allows us to transcend age. There are times when as runners we proclaim our age proudly, without regret, without embarrassment. There are times when running connects us to our younger selves. These are the times when running truly makes age just a number.

Mine's 53.