

This past week, I went down to the farm to do some work and drove past the Paoli Friends meetinghouse where Joan and I were married in 1984. I remember that day like it was 32 years ago. The minister saying, "If there is anyone here who knows why these two should not marry, speak now or forever hold your peace." And Joan's mother handing him a list.

Not long after that, we were in Paoli on a Sunday morning, so drove into town for meeting for worship and they had a new pastor named Fred. He introduced himself, I mentioned I was a Quaker minister too and Fred said, "You young people make me sick. You don't know how terrible it is to be old."

He said it just like that. How terrible it was to be old.

I asked Fred how old he was and he said 55, which didn't strike me then or now as all that old. I thought about Fred when I drove past the meetinghouse this past week, then thought about him again when I was at the nursing home later in the week visiting my father, who for years has lived under the illusion that he is Benjamin Button and should be getting younger every year. Since that isn't happening, it's made my father angry and at times difficult to be around.

Sometimes my father reminds me of King Saul, who instead of growing into a wise, old patriarch, beloved by his subjects, became embittered and jealous of David's youthfulness, so chased him around the countryside trying to kill him.

Aging isn't popular in our country, as evidenced by the amount of money we spend trying to avoid it. Last year, Americans spent 13 billion dollars on 16 million cosmetic surgeries or procedures to erase the effects of aging. 92% of those procedures were performed on women, which tells us something about how women are made to feel about growing old. But not just women. My dermatologist wanted me to spend \$14,000 so he could relocate 7,000 hair follicles from the thickly forested back of my head to the expansive desert that is the top of my head.

"It'll take 20 years off of you," he said.

"No it won't," I told him. "I will still be 55 no matter what you do to my hair."

But he wasn't done. He had one more weapon.

"People who look younger make more money," he said.

"Warren Buffet is 85," I said.

He didn't know what to say to that.

He made it sound as if aging were a disease we needed to cure, rather than a natural process we all experience. When old age is viewed as a disease, as a sickness, then our response to aging is medical in nature. And medical responses are almost always about prolonging life rather than enriching it. So we have become masterful at keeping the flesh alive, but rather poor at keeping our spirits alive, keeping our passions alive.

There is an impersonal element present in our treatment of the elderly. At my parent's nursing home is a large day room where the residents are taken each morning. There's a big television on the wall, and all the people face the television, which plays old movies. So they're staring at the back of one another's heads. That's all they see, all day, the backs of one another's heads. It's very impersonal. Instead of grouping people together in small circles so they can talk with one another and be seen and noticed and engaged, they are placed so they will never be noticed, so no one will see them smile or laugh or cry, so no one can ever hear them should they wish to speak. It would be like sitting at a dinner table with all the chairs facing out.

They're literally turning their back on one another, which has been our cultural response to aging. No wonder we spent 13 billion dollars on 16 million cosmetic surgeries and procedures last year, because who wants to be treated as if they're invisible and unimportant and no longer matter. It might be part of the reason my father is so angry and bitter, and why my mother told me this week she wants to die.

In 1892, in the Quaker magazine, *The British Friend*, George MacDonald, the Scottish poet and pastor, wrote, "Never tell a child he *has* a soul. Teach him that he *is* a soul, and *has* a body."

When we see an elderly person, what's the first thing we notice? Their bodies. And what do we say just as soon as they're out of earshot? "My, they have certainly gotten old. Did you notice that? Did you see how old she looked? Did you see how old he looked?"

As if their bodies convey the totality of their worth and personhood.

This past Tuesday I was chatting with a lady at Phyllis Gladden's memorial service, a lady who knew Phyllis through china painting. We were talking about Phyllis and this woman said, "She was such a beautiful soul."

It made me think of how Phyllis's body had really failed this past year. So much so that when I was with her, I'd look at her body and think her body somehow represented her. But the china painter lady reminded me that Phyllis's beautiful soul had continued to flourish and love and care.

Phyllis didn't *have* a soul. She *was* a soul. She *had* a body. And that body let her down. Just as yours will. Just as mine will. We can have all the face lifts we want. We can color our hair, or move it around. We can replace our knees and hips, tuck our tummies, and remove our wrinkles, but all those things won't add a single day to our lives. Our bodies will fail us.

But our souls, our connections, our passions, our loves, our longings, our hopes, our dreams, our visions, our joys, our gratitude, they remain as central to our lives as ever. They are the part of us the years can neither corrode nor abolish. That is who we are.

All of this is to say two things:

When you look at the elderly, don't notice their wrinkles. Notice their souls.

When you consider your own aging, don't tend to your wrinkles. Tend to your soul.