

How to Be 50
On Growing Up in Childish Times

An Essay In 50 short pieces

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1. it is time to grow up: I'm going to

be fifty. I'd like to do it right, so I'm trying to prepare: doing some research, reading and observing, keeping a notebook.

How to age in an anti-aging culture? How to be a full-blown grownup when one is expected to be forever young? How to learn – step by step – to be unabashedly old? These are the questions that got me started. Fifty is not the new forty, it is just plain old fifty. But to me, it is new and intriguing.

“Life is now my age,” says the protagonist of “The Grass and the River,” a short story by the Israeli writer Yael Neeman. Soon after turning fifty, she recounts, “Old age leaped upon me all at once. I opened my eyes and realized that Obama was one year younger than I was.”

I take this notion to be very powerful, if not intimidating: life is now my age. Anybody who is doing anything significant,

influential, is my age. I have arrived. But arrived where, exactly? What am I supposed to do now? How can anybody possibly know how to be fifty when everywhere we go, we're told that we don't look it, that we haven't changed a bit, that we look not a year older than—you know, a decade ago?

How to be fifty and love it?

"The older I get," writes Sharon Olds in "The Older," "the more I feel almost beautiful." I think I can relate to that.

"And I will be fifty, soon," Olds goes on, "my body getting withery and scrawny, and I like its silvery witheriness, the skin thinning, surface of a lake crumpled by wind, rucked wraith, a wrinkle of smoke. Yet when I look down, I can see, sometimes, things that if a young woman saw she would scream, as if at a horror movie..."

Should I be screaming now? What exactly about?

Now, at almost fifty, wrinkles and thinning skin are the least of my concerns. In my current musings I wish not to neglect them, or any other bodily failings attributable to life in the sixth decade, but they are not center stage. My main concern is something quite different. I'm thinking of the psychological challenges and privileges that are attached to growing up.

One definition of maturity, conceived by Kant, is the ability to think for oneself.

This is not to be taken lightly, argues Susan Neiman in her inspiring *Why Grow Up – Subversive Thoughts for an Infantile Age*. The state, the media and corporations will do everything within their power to prevent us from thinking for ourselves. Hence, Neiman notes, growing up requires courage, and it's a task that never ends. How can I think for myself in a culture of herd mentality? Wherever I look, I see the world pressuring me to stay youthful and ignorant and wanting constant reassurances. An eager consumer has a lot in common with a child. Turning off all smartphone notifications can be only a fraction of the changes needed in my life if I plan to attain

independent thought – real maturation – along with the freedom and responsibility that come with it.

I had challenged myself here to post fifty short pieces, one each week, beginning on my 49th birthday until I turn fifty. Each post would look at one small aspect of growing up. I've chosen to do so in English, even though Hebrew is my first writing language. I believe this choice has something to do with stepping out of my comfort zone. It's also about re-connecting with the English part of my bilingual roots. And yes, it may have something to do with my notion that the culture of Hebrew-speakers is obsolete. Perhaps I need to create for my family and myself a path out of our fallen land. But this is too much of a digression.

2. We live in the era of the upgrade.

Nothing is made, or expected, to last.

Upgrading to the new version, replacing the (one-year-old)

gadget with the one that just came out. Everywhere we look, we see people worshipping the new, solely because it is a reason to purchase again and again, and dispose of the old.

It is truly a weird era. Some attribute its beginning to the invention of the disposable razor blade, by King Camp Gillette, in the first decade of the 20th century, followed by the invention of disposable pens, disposable diapers, disposable everything. There is no more need for experts to repair our watches, our sofas, our washing machines. The Chinese worker will work long, underpaid hours to make it cheap for us to buy, use, dispose, buy another, use, dispose, buy again.

This hasn't always been the case: before the emergence of our disposable culture, industries took pride in making products – cars, radios, refrigerators – that lasted for decades, that could be passed down from one generation to another. Nowadays, industries deliberately make products that have a short life span – with built-in malfunctions – so that consumer culture can stay in motion and people will constantly seek the unused, the updated, the next thing. This strategy has a terrific name: planned obsolescence. In the era of the upgrade, growing

up, and old – the mere fact of our lasting, enduring, sticking around – might feel somewhat downgrading.

3. Underlying the challenges of growing old

in our culture of the upgrade, of planned obsolescence – a culture in which progress is considered an act of disposing of the old – is a widely accepted perception: that a new person's life is by definition better than that of an old one. We tend to assume that our best years are behind us. That our teens and twenties were the peak of our time on earth. At sixteen, "it's all cream and cherries," as a song by the popular Israeli band Gazoz has it. It's downhill once you reach a certain point.

I know for a fact that my teens and twenties are nothing to look back or up to. My best decade so far is the one I'm ending soon – my forties, the time of acquired freedom and joy. My thirties were about working hard at building my self-confidence and identity; my twenties were fraught with debilitating

anxieties. My teens depressed. My first years melancholic. But is it only me?

“By describing what is usually the hardest time of one’s life as the best one, we make that time harder for those who are growing through it,” writes Neiman in *Why Grow Up*. “By describing life as a downhill process, we prepare young people to expect, and demand, very little from it.”

4. “What would it be like to relish aging?” asks Anne Karpf in her wonderful

How to Age. What would it be like “to continue, after the age of 25, to say ‘I hope to grow older’...to genuinely look forward to aging and not, at best, merely tolerate it?”

As children, we enjoy feeling like grownups and being told that we are mature. My 8-year-old daughter seems quite proud when we say that she is as smart and sensitive as an 18-year-old. She seems less happy when we reproach her for not

acting her age (meaning—acting like a younger version of herself).

When – at what age – does maturity cease to be a positive attribute?

“It’s a completely different experience to grow older in the early twenty-first century,” writes Karpf, “when being young is looked upon as a distinct, enviable and prolonged state, than it was in, say, the 1940s, before the arrival of teen clothing and culture.” Before the arrival of full-blown consumer culture, young people couldn’t wait to look and sound like grownups. Nowadays we reach a point in our life when, sadly, we wish to stop changing. When exactly does this happen? At twenty-five? Thirty-five? I do hope the time will come when someone will say: Hey, you’re fifty, you look it, it’s great, congratulations!

5. But first, I must confess: At almost fifty, I have yet to achieve my own maturity. I am still often inflicted by a childish state of mind. For me, growing up is still a goal, a work in progress.

What is it exactly that makes me feel immature? Is it the dreamer in me? Is it the part of me that wants to be saved – patronized, supported – by a grownup? Is aging a process of standing up on my own? Of accepting my profound solitude— which is not to say loneliness? My profound independence, the harsh fact of me not depending and not relying on anyone but myself? Surely dependence does not cease to exist when we grow up. We still depend on the kindness of others, on friendship, on family. But it must be a new kind of dependence – one that cannot be taken for granted and must be nourished.

A grownup, I am reminded, is by definition a person who is able to think for herself. Yes, this must be it. The childish part of me must be the part that wants some other grownup to think for me, to make my decisions for me, and to back up those decisions with considerable allowances. I guess it is time to let go of such childish dreams.

6. “The afternoon of human life is just as full of meaning as the morning,”

wrote Carl Jung in 1943, “only, its meaning and purpose are different.” Finding the meaning that is unique to the afternoon of life may be a major challenge. Or, as Anne Karpf puts it in *How to Age*, “The midlife crisis – if indeed such a thing exists – could be said to be a crisis of meaning.”

“As a rule,” wrote Jung, “the life of a young person is characterized by a general expansion and a striving towards concrete ends; and his neurosis seems mainly to rest on his hesitation or shrinking back from this necessity. But the life of an older person is characterized by a contraction of forces, by the affirmation of what has been achieved, and by the curtailment of further growth. His neurosis comes mainly from his clinging to a youthful attitude which is now out of season....”

What would be, for me, an erroneous clinging to a youthful attitude? Could it be the wish to be acknowledged by

anyone other than myself? Could it be my youthful bitterness: a feeling that I deserve more – recognition, awards, rewards – than I achieve? Or is it something more profound?

During the morning of my life, I found meaning in the act of shaping my ideas, my identity, my uniqueness. I found satisfaction in acquiring a proud sense of queerness, otherness. Now, approaching fifty, I am beginning to think – and I am not sure that I like it – that the afternoon of life is a time to say goodbye to my uniqueness-anxiety. A time not to give up on my otherness, but to humbly accept my regularity; the many ways in which I am a normal member of humankind, of my age group, my social class, my gender. The fact of my mortality. This is a disturbing notion for me.

7. “To age is a sin,” said

Madonna. This was a truly powerful and timely moment for my “How to be 50” pondering: Madonna speaking bluntly about a lifetime of enduring misogyny, on the occasion

of receiving the “Woman of the Year” award at **Billboard's Women in Music** 2016 event. The award celebrated a lifetime of popularity and achievement for Madonna, but her own experience was not as joyful. An inspiring party-pooper, she chose to share with us a lesson she had learned:

“...If you're a girl, you have to play the game. You're allowed to be pretty and cute and sexy. But don't act too smart. Don't have an opinion that's out of line with the status quo. You are allowed to be objectified by men and dress like a slut, but don't own your sluttiness...” Then came this line:

“And finally, do not age. Because to age is a sin.”

This terrific, saddening and infuriating feminist speech by Madonna threw me 44 years back, to Susan Sontag's passionate essay, [“The Double Standard of Aging”](#) (first published in 1972). Has nothing changed in the four-and-a-half decades since? Sontag, at 39, thought that “there is a normal sense in which nobody, men and women alike, relishes growing older. After thirty-five any mention of one's age carries with it the reminder that one is probably closer to the end of one's life than to the beginning. There is nothing unreasonable in that anxiety.” But

Sontag makes two distinctions: one between old age and growing old, and one between the way we experience these differently as women and as men.

“The objective, sacred pain of old age is of another order than the subjective, profane pain of aging,” she writes. “Old age is a genuine ordeal, one that men and women undergo in a similar way. Growing older is mainly an ordeal of the imagination—a moral disease, a social pathology—intrinsic to which is the fact that it hits women much more than men. It is particularly women who experience growing older (everything that comes before one is actually old) with such distaste and even shame.” She explains: “‘Femininity’ is identified with incompetence, helplessness, passivity, non-competitiveness, being nice. Age does not improve these qualities. Thus, for most women, aging means a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification. Since women are considered maximally eligible in early youth, after which their sexual value drops steadily, even young women feel themselves in a desperate race against the calendar. They are old as soon as they are no longer very young.”

Sontag's fear of growing old in this essay is less compelling to me than her resonant advice for women on how to better handle the double standard of aging: Just don't be girls, she says. Be women.

“Women have another option. They can aspire to be wise, not merely nice; to be competent, not merely helpful; to be strong, not merely graceful; to be ambitious for themselves, not merely for themselves in relation to men and children. They can let themselves age naturally and without embarrassment, actively protesting and disobeying the conventions that stem from this society's double standard about aging. Instead of being girls, girls as long as possible, who then age humiliatingly into middle-aged women and then obscenely into old women, they can become women much earlier—and remain active adults, enjoying the long, erotic career of which women are capable, far longer. Women should allow their faces to show the lives they have lived. Women should tell the truth.”

8. I had planned to write this essay in fifty pieces,

one weekly post at a time, over a year, until I turned fifty. I even proclaimed as much [in my first post](#). And here I am, writing my eighth post after ten weeks of silence; I have failed to find the time to keep my promise to myself. Other obligations – mostly paid work but also family time, domestic chores and drinking – came first. I kept putting off writing my essay for seemingly more pressing needs.

This kind of failure might have been a source of great anxiety and stress to me in the past (and an excuse for more drinking). Now I find myself quite all right with it. I realize that today, at almost fifty, I feel fine about breaking this one particular promise: I know that I *will* finish my 50-piece essay by the end of this year, even if not exactly at the pace that I had planned; I know that I can be flexible. And I know that nobody but myself would care.

Growing up feels at times like an ongoing course in letting go, cutting myself some slack. For me, being young

entailed being achingly strict with myself. This, I do not miss. I get to write these lines now because I'm enjoying a rare and coveted weekend writer's retreat at home. My partner and our girls have gone up north to spend time with friends and left time and space for me to work at my desk. Bliss is a writer's solitude, with her loved ones having a good time elsewhere: not too far away and coming back soon.

9. One great achievement of growing up and approaching

fifty: I get to be post-anxious. Not post-caring, not nihilistic or indifferent, nor necessarily very brave. Just not very anxious anymore, in the sense of the multiple ways that anxiety ruled my life for so many years: I was constantly anxious about what people would make of me, how to impress or make as little impression as possible, how to connect and how to disconnect, how to attract or repel, how to do it—any of it—right. I was

anxious – asthmatic, headachy, shy, nail-biting, avoiding, shunning, always perceiving a critical gaze by imagined others.

If I could have told my anxious young self that post-anxiety was waiting somewhere along the way, would it have been of any use to her? I doubt it. One cannot be post-feminist or post-modern without going through feminism or modernism earnestly; one cannot be post-anxious if one has not fully experienced and explored one's own anxiety.

10. In the time when I was not writing my weekly posts, I did do some reading. I was lucky to bump into this

illuminating quote, by Erich Fromm, at the very precious blog [Brain Pickings](#): **“The whole life of the individual is nothing but the process of giving birth to himself; indeed, we should be fully born, when we die – although it is the tragic fate of most individuals to die before they are born.”**

11. Giving birth to myself: what a

wonderfully and impossibly difficult task. And how lucky I am to be at it now, in my post-anxious era. Here is how May Sarton, the American poet and memoirist, tells it in “At 70”:

I am just back from a month of poetry readings, in and out through all of April. At Hartford College in Connecticut, I had been asked to talk about old age — “The View From Here,” I called the reading — in a series on “The Seasons of Womanhood.” In the course of it I said, “This is the best time of my life. I love being old.” At that point a voice from the audience asked loudly, “Why is it good to be old?” I answered spontaneously and a little on the defensive, for I sensed incredulity in the questioner, “Because I am more myself than I have ever been. There is less conflict. I am happier, more balanced, and”

(I heard myself say rather aggressively) “more powerful.” I felt it was rather an odd word, “powerful,” but I think it is true. It might have been more accurate to say “I am better able to use my powers.” I am surer of what my life is all about, have less self-doubt to conquer...

12. Getting to be “more myself

than I have ever been” and acquiring the

ability to better use my powers, as the late Sartre puts it, is for me a work in progress, and a fascinating challenge at that. One other great challenge for me is inspired by what Oliver Sacks managed to achieve on his death bed, at 92 (*Gratitude*, Knopf 2015):

And now, weak, short of breath, my once-firm muscles melted away by cancer, I find my thoughts, increasingly, not on the supernatural

or spiritual but on what is meant by living a good and worthwhile life – achieving a sense of peace within oneself.

How do you do that – give birth to yourself, achieve a sense of peace within yourself? I’m not sure. I only know that I have to be working at it – not later but now.

I also know this: the question that Sacks was pondering - “what is meant by living a good and worthwhile life” – is the question that hovers above every personal essay and memoir since *The Essays* by Montaigne. “How to live?” is the most pressing humanistic question I can think of. The best way to tackle it, to study it, is to read personal essays – if not to examine oneself. “I had rather understand myself well in myself, than in Cicero,” wrote Montaigne. “The life of Caesar has no greater example for us than our own”.

13. Part of growing up and old is about getting to know oneself.

First stage: looking in the mirror. I am not beautiful. This is a profoundly liberating understanding. When I was young – during my teens and my twenties – I used to avoid mirrors. Every encounter with my reflection was a disappointing surprise. Later on, seeing my reflection became a fairly pleasant experience – the gap between my imagined body and face and the real ones was growing narrower. Now, approaching fifty, I'm trying to come to terms with every imperfect aspect of my appearance. It's not easy. A few recent changes are for the worse. For example: my teeth, fixed by an orthodontist some thirty-five years ago, have been regressing to their independent disarray. But they are my teeth; it is my smile.

14. Sylvia Plath famously wrote through the eyes of the mirror:

**...Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.**

I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old
woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

(from "Mirror")

15. Second stage: facing my

fears. I have lately realized, while working on a play about a fifty-year-old woman, that the protagonist, who wears her age proudly as a badge of achievement, is at the same time secretly afraid of growing old. She fears sickness, weakness, forgetfulness, impoverishment.

What to do? I don't know. I suppose I should be staying fit. And I must keep working. But for now, I will just accept that I am afraid.

16. Montaigne puts it like this (in his essay "On Experience"):

God is favourable to those whom He makes to die by degrees; 'tis the only benefit of old age; the last death will be so much the less painful; it will kill but a half or a quarter of a man. There is one tooth lately fallen out without drawing and without pain; it was the natural term of its duration [...] 'tis so I melt and steal away from myself.

17. Third stage: facing the sheer sadness of mortality; of not spending

enough time on earth with my loved ones, my partner and my daughters.

18. This should do for now. I am spending some quality time now with my sadness and fears. And I'm turning to the poets.

19. Billy Collins wrote plainly about forgetfulness:

The name of the author is the first to go followed obediently by the title, the plot, the heartbreaking conclusion, the entire novel which suddenly becomes one you have never read, never even heard of,

as if, one by one, the memories you used to harbor decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain (...)

20. Amanda Dalton suggests practice, in her poem, “How to Disappear”:

First rehearse the easy things.
Lose your words in a high wind,
walk in the dark on an unlit road,
observe how other people mislay keys,
their diaries, new umbrellas.
See what it takes to go unnoticed
in a crowded room. Tell lies:
*I love you. I'll be back in half an hour.
I'm fine. (...)*

21. Inspired by Anne Lamott, who recently, at the age of sixty-one, [listed the twelve things she is](#)

[almost sure of](#), I'm trying to put together my own list of accumulated truths. What does one almost know for sure at almost fifty?

For one: I know now that growing up for me is a process of getting closer to myself, and pushing insecurities away.

22. At almost fifty, I know firsthand

the banal truth that when dreams and aspirations come true, they inevitably produce new attainable or unattainable dreams and aspirations. (During my twenties I aspired to be a writer; I had decided to practice first as a journalist, which I did for twenty years, and now, after quitting journalism and after having written and published seven books, I know that yes, my dream has come true: I am a writer! Alas, I have not arrived. I wish to be a better writer, or more successful, in ways that I am yet to figure out for myself.)

There is no sustainable satisfaction.

23. I know now for sure that there is nothing more precious than friendship and that it does not always last forever. People change, as do circumstances.

24. I know for sure that one needn't fear conventional wisdom, nor should one be anxious about keeping up with the Joneses. This is because one has the power to change conventional wisdom and even change the Joneses! (During my twenties, I was terribly fearful about being gay, assuming society would disapprove. Now I am unabashedly queer, and I know that no one but I can do the approving. My Tel Aviv Joneses – even my most ultra-conservative-religious neighbours – all seem oblivious to such labels and identities. The principle of diversity has prevailed). It all truly is in the eyes of the beholder.

25. At almost fifty, I almost know the power of solitude as opposed to the fragility of loneliness.

26. At almost fifty, I know to never say never. (During my teens and twenties I was absolutely sure that I would always be a loner, never in a relationship; now I cherish everything about my family of two moms, two girls and one dog, including my capacity to be alone in their presence.)

27. I know for sure I should stay fit and that I don't.

28. I know that chocolate gives me
migraines.

29. I know that I am not brave.

30. I know that I am at my best when I am
writing.

31. I love this poem by William
Carlos Williams:

Danse Russe

If I when my wife is sleeping
and the baby and Kathleen
are sleeping
and the sun is a flame-white disc

in silken mists
above shining trees,—
if I in my north room
dance naked, grotesquely
before my mirror
waving my shirt round my head
and singing softly to myself:
“I am lonely, lonely.
I was born to be lonely,
I am best so!”
If I admire my arms, my face,
my shoulders, flanks, buttocks
against the yellow drawn shades,—

Who shall say I am not
the happy genius of my household?

32. Listening to the psychoanalyst Esther Perel inspires

me to think of my life as a movement between two essential states of mind: survival and revival. Being not dead as opposed to being alive. Perel talks about the community of Belgian Holocaust survivors in which she grew up. She found that there were two distinct groups in that community, albeit with a shared traumatic experience: there were those who merely survived, and those who also managed to revive themselves. The survivors were the people who kept their sofas covered in plastic, played it safe, and were constantly vigilant, alert. They never allowed themselves to rejoice over anything, for fear that rejoicing might bring calamity upon them. The revivers were those who took risks, were *bon vivant* (“they didn’t survive for nothing,” Perel says of her parents), played, desired. Perel writes elaborately about the erotic as an antidote to death.

For complex psychological reasons, I find that I am very much in the plastic-covered-sofa group. I am more a survivor than a reviver.

33. Being alive, or in the erotic,

or having a vital connection with Eros, could be narrowed down to three D's: Daring, Desiring, Doing; not necessarily in that order. These three verbs are quite foreign to my experience. And as Esther Perel makes clear, this is not about having sex or about "just doing it," Nike-style. It's about a celebration of imagination, of yearning, of the creative experience.

34. Being not dead - surviving -

could be associated with these three A's: Anxiety, Assurances and Abstinence—or Avoidance. I am no stranger to these nouns. They have been the pillars of my existence. This is about doing the right thing. Being a good girl. Seeking respectfulness. Righteousness.

35. Can one truly change at

fifty? Is it not too late? I hope not. I wish to dedicate the

rest of my maturing years to moving between vigilance and playfulness, abstinence and desire, nouns and verbs.

36. So here I am. I have reached my jubilee. My very own *annus mirabilis*. My private miraculous year. I love the term *jubilee*. Why am I so attracted to its festiveness?

37. Jubilee, according to Merriam-Webster, is “a year of emancipation and restoration provided by ancient Hebrew law to be kept every 50 years by the emancipation of Hebrew slaves, restoration of alienated lands to their former owners, and omission of all cultivation of the land.” It is time to set free and be free. (I feel that this is where I should add: end the fifty-year-old damned occupation! Though, to be honest, I am thinking here exclusively about my own private fifty years of self-confinement.)

38. Jubilee, in the second dictionary definition, is “a period of time

proclaimed by the Roman Catholic pope ordinarily every 25 years as a time of special solemnity.” It is half a century. It is a solemn, serious matter.

39. Jubilee, the dictionary continues, is also “a special plenary indulgence

granted during a year of jubilee to Roman Catholics who perform certain specified works of repentance and piety.”

I do repent, in the sense defined, again, by Merriam-Webster: to turn from sin and dedicate oneself to the amendment of one's life.

40. Which reminds me of a poem that I cherish: “The

Journey” by Mary Oliver, which begins with the
lines:

**One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice (...)**

And ends with the speaker determined:

**to do the only thing you could do
— — — determined to save
the only life you could save.**

41. I like to think that I have earned my jubilee. Earned the privilege of having a perspective. I have earned the ability to take life – rather than myself – very seriously. It is not here to last. I have been working hard at trying to figure it out. I have been very slow on the uptake.

42. “At 50, everyone has the face he deserves,” George Orwell is said to have said.

43. “Nature gives you the face you have at twenty; it is up to you to merit the face you have at fifty.” This is attributed to Coco Chanel.

44. “As we grow old...the beauty steals inward,” wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson.

45. I’ve been reaching all the aforementioned realizations about the misconceptions of aging, and about the change for the better, for the different, that I expect to bring to my life after fifty. I try to realize rather than regret. “If I had known at twenty what I know now” – this is an illogical and unhelpful notion for me. There is no actual lesson to be learned in retrospect.

True: I wasn’t happy growing up, my young self was mostly fearful, but I was also powerfully devoted to fixing this predicament (I had a great therapist and good friends helping me along the way) as I grew older.

46. There is a lot to keep thinking about. But this essay is coming to an end.

Here are a few jubilee resolutions – notes to self – in an iteration of my favourite birthday ritual:

First: think about death often. Know that life ahead is shorter than life passed. Practice accepting this fact profoundly.

47. Make a plan. Make a list. Think about what you want to do, how you want to be, with your time on earth. Check off each mission and aspiration as you accomplish it.

48. Constantly update your list.

Delete and add. Think about other people, including those you

don't usually engage with – different ages, different cultures – and try to imagine their point of view on life, on how to live. Pick their brains, read their writings.

49. Keep writing about your experience. Document and reflect.

50. You may have ten years, a whole decade, before you turn sixty. Indulge.