

When I Grow Up I Wanna Be an Old Woman

By Connie Ordway

[Sing the first part of "An Old Woman"]

That song was popular on the radio in my 20s. I remember that once after the song was over, the DJ commented, "like she has a choice."

I have heard it said that to be an old woman is to be invisible. Women over 50 experience this as the eyes of the grocery cashier glaze over when they see us in their lines. It's a look of disappointment, as if they had been hoping to see someone younger, more charming, more "alive".

I am learning how to be an old woman from the beautiful old women around me. And now that I've called them "old," none of these beautiful women will be named. But I see you, you woman of a certain age, who dare to not put makeup on anymore, trusting that this face you have lived with for your 50 years shows who you have become. You don't have to hide anymore (you never did, but...). I'm proud of you, who have come to trust your face.

I walk behind you, woman with the white, white hair, who has decided that 60 years is long enough to lie that you've always been a redhead. I want to reach out and touch your shining hair, to see if it feels different than my own going-to-gray locks. You give me *such hope* that I won't have to dye my hair so that people don't look through me.

I've watched you as your face softens and wrinkles, this 70-year-old face that could once have graced the pages of magazines. You are still so beautiful. I think it's the sense of being comfortable in your own skin that I am responding to. And I think to myself, I can do this. Loss of beauty, growth of wrinkles, graying of hair—all part of the turning of the Wheel.

In the Celtic pagan tradition I follow, we celebrate the Triple Goddess. She has 3 faces: The Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone.

I have been The Maiden—carefree, longhaired, exulting in youth and energy. As a 20-something, I was thin, beautiful, intelligent, so much fun. I stayed up drinking and dancing all night, and then went to work the next day; I was the perfect party girl. Exhilarating. Exhausting. And then...

I became The Mother. I have parented 2 stepsons, a biological child, and 2 beautiful children that Jeff and I adopted out of foster care. I have had every kind of child it is

possible to have. By the time my youngest graduates high school, I will have been parenting minor children continuously for 41 years. Oh yes—I have been the Mother!

And now I am finding the beauty inherent in becoming old. the Crone, the Wise Woman, the Witch Elder who knows and who sees.

Do me the courtesy of believing me when I tell you that I am getting old. I may not be as old as *you*, it is true. I may not be your idea of an old woman. I may have more energy than most folks my age, and I know that I look, perhaps, 10 years younger than I am. But understand that I feel every day of my 57 years, that I have 57 years' worth of experience, of memories, of actions and regrets—I am beginning to *feel* old.

*When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
With a red hat that doesn't go, and doesn't suit me,
And I shall spend my pension
on brandy and summer gloves
And satin sandals,
and say we've no money for butter.
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
And run my stick along the public railings
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
And pick the flowers in other people's gardens
And learn to spit.
You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat
And eat three pounds of sausages at a go
Or only bread and pickle for a week
And hoard pens and pencils and beermats and things in boxes.
But now we must have clothes that keep us dry
And pay our rent and not swear in the street
And set a good example for the children.
We must have friends to dinner and read the papers.
But maybe I ought to practice a little now?
So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised
When suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple.*

That poem, called "Warning" by Jenny Joseph has become an anthem for we women of a certain age, a paean to nonconformity, a promise that our old age still holds promise.

Blesséd be.