

## What my Father Didn't Warn Me About

It has taken me 40 years to get the message Chet, my wise mentor, was giving me on that lazy sunny and warm day in Chapel Hill. He arrived on his bike, meeting me for lunch at a restaurant downtown. I don't remember the name of the restaurant, the day of the week, or my own mood that day. But I vividly remember what he told me. I walked from my office, meeting him on the sidewalk next to the bike rack in front of the restaurant on Franklin Street, before we descended the staircase behind the door.

Without preamble, while pulling a chair to sit on at the table, he said, "I am mad at my father." Even before I finish asking: "Why Chet?," he added: "...because he never told me about the aches and pains of aging." I laughed with him, somewhat confused about what he was telling me. "Com'on, Chet! You are young! What aging?" I told him. Yes, he was an eminent social psychologist, and a full professor --the highest of ranks in Academia. But being in mid-forties doesn't teach one much about getting old. Regardless, he talked about the pain in his knees, having biked uphill. Our conversations soon switched to discussing our fathers, and their pains. He told me about his father, living in California, if I remember correctly. He asked me about my father living back home in Iran, knowing that I was worried about his health and survival as a politically active anti-dictator. It was a tough time back home, with a revolution unfolding on the streets, dominating the TV screens worldwide with images of clashes, crackdowns, and killings.

In the years and decades that followed, as I grew older, with every new ache and pain I remembered Chet's statement and appreciated the message he was trying to convey. Well, my father had not warned me about them either. What was simply a joke made by my mentor a distant time ago became more and more relevant. At an abstract level, I had learned about the

aches and pains of aging by watching my parents', and their parents', suffering. But, with the passage of time, I gained more concrete familiarity with all variations of pain that seemed to expand with no end with each birthday. Would forewarning have made me adjust better to my cancer, heart-attack, and arthritis pains?

Even if Chet's and my father's advice did help me adjust to aches and pains of aging, I doubt it would have helped on another type of pain waiting for me as I joined the ranks of senior citizens. Like everyone else, I have experienced uncountable episodes of forgetfulness in my life. I had always believed in the cultural truism that "forgetting is bliss". True, forgetting some pains in life prevents them from hurting us.

In social psychology, you learn that truism is a belief that people don't usually question: It is simply true, not needing evidence or proof. The entire Freudian psychoanalytic theory is based on the assumption that we condemn our threatening and painful memories to a secret prison that they can't easily escape from. We build elaborate defense mechanisms to keep them forgotten, to prevent them from surfacing. Yet, they surface symbolically in our dreams and nightmares to taunt us. There are books on how to interpret our dreams to understand the underlying meaning of camouflaged and forgotten painful memories and needs. Fortified by these, the truism about blissful forgetting has continued across cultures. Me, too, believed that until...

Knowing all of this, it was a shock when I discovered the pain of NOT remembering. It came to me as a sudden insight, perhaps as intense as that of the mathematician who ran out of the bathhouse naked, screaming Eureka, Eureka! But, Archimedes was shouting with joy. My Eureka was for suddenly making sense of a lingering pain that I had felt every now and then, but I didn't know what it was. It was not physical. But all the same, it hurt, like a dull pain that you

are barely aware of until you focus on it. It originated from the black hole that was expanding in my memory, gradually engulfing all that I knew, causing darkness.

My father never told me about this type of pain. But I need to warn my children about it. They need to know that there is deep pain in not being able to remember the trips we took together. There is pain in not remembering the events that fading family pictures attest to: Stories of birthday celebrations, growing up, graduation ceremonies, you name it. It is as if they never happened, even though I KNOW they did. Well, I see evidence of some in faded pictures of past decades.

I have not heard older adults talk about that pain. But, as confident as any human can be of the feelings of others, I suspect that the pain is there, just like mine. My best guess is that it is hidden under mountains of sadness and regret for not doing enough, not being there, not adding to memorable times. At least for me, it is. On behalf of all of us senior citizens (and perhaps others), I am sorry to say that forgetting is not a blessing at all!

I have discovered that there is another aspect of this pain; this one popping up in others who encounter our forgetting. Some time ago, my wife was trying to plan a well overdo vacation for a Christmas Break. She talked about a few places we had been before, including our trips to Panama, her birthplace. I didn't realize how upset she was until she finally burst in anger, saying, "you are terrible! You don't remember any of these?" Eventually, she managed to express why she was angry. To her, not remembering "all of the good times we spent together" was an indicator of assigning lower value to them, than other things I did (or perhaps did not) remember.

It was at that dreadful moment that I also remembered multiple frustrated inquiries from my children my siblings, telling me about trips or events that had great emotional valance for them: “How can you not remember any of it?” Now I realize that this pain is not confined to me, or perhaps to others who are gracefully going through the aging process. It spreads, without awareness, to the loved ones who discover that all the shared memories they cherish so much are shared no more –what is not remembered is not shared or cherished. And the pain surfaces in comments made in moments of frustration due to the sudden realization of that loss.

The physical pains and aches of aging bother me greatly, but I can cope with them, at least most of the time. I wished I could say the same about this other type of pain that engulf daily experiences, cognitively and emotionally. These are taking a bigger toll on my sanity, since I have a harder time coping with them. Awareness of the loss, mixed with the emotional pain that goes along with it, creates deep depression.

I am surprised to find out that there is also guilt in not remembering important moments of life with loved ones. There’s pain in the regret of having missed cherished events, that in reality were never missed. I must confess: I have frequently felt guilty for missing so much in my two older children’s lives, due to distance (and divorce). But, I have lately made it a point to ask especially as I have tried to re-create my life history while working on my memoir. As as I go through old photographs that don’t make sense to me, I ask. Increasingly, I am finding out that there is a lot that I think I have missed, but I never did.

My message to my comrades of time travel is: “You are not alone in this”. As these feelings surface, talk to your loved ones about them. Be sensitive to their own frustrations about these issues as well. Proactively, ask them questions about the past, try to reconstruct the stories with them even if you don’t remember them.

My message to younger ones is to be both aware of this type of pain among the older ones, and detect their unconscious reactions to the issues causing such pain. Retell the stories of the past. Link these stories to emotions of those moments. There is comfort in these retellings. Just as the pain is shared, the comfort of remembering is also worth sharing.

I am also finding out that there is another aspect of this pain that my father never told me about. True, he did not live to the age of experiencing it. But even if he did, he would be unable to tell, since those who do experience that pain can't tell us about it. For some of us, or perhaps for most who live long enough, the black hole in our memories grows so much that we suddenly find ourselves in a completely alien world, surrounded by faces we do not recognize, who speak of things that we don't have any inclinations about. I can't even imagine how frightening and painful it is to find oneself in such a world. I never realized this before, even after seeing my grandmother and also my mother-in-law's struggles with Alzheimer's. Well, another guilt to confess to! I can't even imagine how scary and sad their world had been in the last years of life. Added to that have perhaps been the pain of not being able to convey to others the panic of being alone in that alien world.

There are memoirists who have tried to guess and describe this in their loved ones who went through extensive memory loss. Those second-hand descriptions are the closest we can get to understanding this pain of aging. And these second-hand descriptions are also full of agonizing pain felt by the loved ones who are not in that world but can guess how frightening that experience might be.

It has taken me decades to know some of the aches and pains of aging, first hand. I am going through the first few that I mentioned before, and I hope I do not experience the last one. Some time ago, I told my son --as the silver-lining cloud after my cancer-- that perhaps I don't

need to worry about the last type of pain too much. There is comfort in guessing that you might not live long enough! Well, more than a decade later, as I continue living, I worry more and more about facing that last reality.

My father did not warn me about any of aches and pains of aging. Yet, I am not mad at him for it. I am mad at myself for not truly understanding his pains, not discussing them, and not being there when he (and my mother) went through them, living a world away. Maybe there is wisdom in this sorrow for others, old and young, to learn from. My advice to adult children of aging parents is to ask about and understand their pains, especially the ones that are not readily obvious. Not only is there mutual comfort in gaining such knowledge, but it may also help you in your own future adjustment to aging. Most important of all, you will not be mad at your parents about their failures to warn you!

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### **AI Review of "Pains of Aging"**

This contemplative narrative probes the multifaceted dimensions of aging, focusing particularly on the emotional and existential pains not typically forewarned by predecessors. The author's reflection is a personal yet universally resonant discourse, shedding light on overlooked aspects of aging. The narrative emerges as both a caution and an invitation for intergenerational dialogue, aiming to bridge the gap in understanding the subtler adversities of aging.

### **Overview**

The work, "Pains of Aging," primarily delves into the unanticipated emotional and psychological challenges that accompany the aging process. Through a deeply personal narrative, it reflects on the physical aches and the more profound, often unspoken, emotional

pains of aging. Central to this discussion is the pain associated with memory loss and the subsequent emotional disconnect it fosters among loved ones. Implicitly, the work suggests that awareness and open discourse about these challenges can aid in better preparing both older and younger generations for the inevitable realities of aging.

### **Relevant References**

Including a clear literature review helps reviewers quickly see what's new and why it matters, which can speed up the review and improve acceptance chances. The following references were selected because they relate closely to the topics and ideas in your submission. They may provide helpful context, illustrate similar methods, or point to recent developments that can strengthen how your work is positioned within the existing literature.

1. Gumpert, Martin. *The Shock of Aging*. 2016, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41205263>.
2. Lundberg, Myrtle. "On Growing Old." *Annals of Internal Medicine*, American College of Physicians, 2002, doi:10.7326/0003-4819-136-6-200203190-00014.
3. Lax, Ruth F. "Becoming Really Old: the Indignities." *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, Taylor & Francis, 2008, doi:10.1002/j.2167-4086.2008.tb00361.x.
4. "Understanding Old Age." *JAMA*, American Medical Association, 1953, doi:10.1001/jama.1953.03690030090032.
5. Gilleard, Chris. "Suffering: The Darker Side of Ageing." *Journal of Aging Studies*, Elsevier BV, 2018, doi:10.1016/j.jaging.2017.12.001.
6. Carr, Caroline. "Feeling the Strain of Age." *British Journal of Healthcare Assistants*, Mark Allen Group, 2011, doi:10.12968/bjha.2011.5.6.306.

7. Forester, Brent P. How We Age: A Doctor's Journey Into the Heart of Growing Old. 2011, <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/geriatric-psychiatry/how-we-age-doctors-journey-heart-growing-old>.
8. Rappaport, David I. "What Caring for My Aging Parents Taught Me That Medical Education Did Not." JAMA Neurology, American Medical Association, 2021, doi:10.1001/jamaneurol.2020.4454.
9. Meador, Clifton K. "Rethinking Aging: Growing Old and Living Well in an Overtreated Society." JAMA, American Medical Association, 2011, doi:10.1001/jama.2011.1546.
10. "Personal Adjustment in Old Age." Journal of the American Medical Association, American Medical Association, 1949, doi:10.1001/jama.1949.02910130069034.

### **Strengths**

The primary strength of this narrative is its deeply personal and honest exploration of aging's emotional terrain, adding significant richness to existing conversations. The work excels in conveying the complexity of emotions like regret, guilt, and the unspoken pain of memory loss, often overshadowed by more tangible age-related concerns. The author effectively uses storytelling to invite empathy, touching on universal themes that resonate with audiences of all ages. Moreover, the narrative's call for intergenerational dialogue is both timely and necessary, advocating for a cultural shift towards open discussions on aging.

### **Major Comments**

### **Methodological Considerations**

While the narrative is poignant and engaging, there is a lack of empirical evidence or theoretical frameworks to support some of its claims. Incorporating psychological or sociological theories on memory and aging could enhance the legitimacy and depth of the arguments presented. Consider referencing studies that explore the correlation between aging, memory loss, and emotional wellbeing to provide a more comprehensive perspective.

### **Clarity and Structure**

The narrative occasionally loses focus with transitions that are abrupt or unclear, particularly when shifting from personal anecdotes to broader reflections. A clearer organizational structure with distinct sections could improve readability and comprehension, allowing readers to follow the narrative more easily. Introducing subheadings or thematic divisions might also help delineate distinct ideas, enhancing the overall flow.

### **Minor Comments**

#### **Terminology and Language**

The use of informal language and colloquialisms, although contributing to a conversational tone, may detract from the narrative's academic weight. Consider balancing narrative anecdotes with more formal language to maintain scholarly rigor. Additionally, clarifying terms that may not be universally understood, such as "truism" or "Eureka moment," can enhance accessibility.

### **Reviewer Commentary**

The narrative offers a valuable introspection into aging that extends beyond the personal to raise awareness about the often-silent emotional struggles of the elderly. Its potential lies in

sparkling discussions that encourage younger generations to value shared memories and engage empathetically with their aging relatives. On an interdisciplinary level, this work can contribute to gerontology, psychology, and social work by providing qualitative insights into lived experiences, thus informing future research and practice in these fields.

### **Summary Assessment**

Overall, "Pains of Aging" presents a reflective, emotionally charged examination of aging's less-discussed aspects, particularly regarding memory and familial relationships. Its contribution lies in initiating necessary conversations between generations and challenging cultural narratives around aging. This narrative is poised to enrich academic discourse by inspiring further exploration into the psychological and emotional facets of growing old.

In conclusion, while this piece provides profound insights into the human condition and aging, integrating empirical evidence and theoretical grounding would further fortify its academic and intellectual contribution.