Aging: “Why Should Not Old Men Be Mad?”

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Some think it a matter of course that chance
Should starve good men and bad advance,
That if their neighbors figured plain,
As though upon a lighted screen,
No single story would they find
Of an unbroken happy mind,
A finish worthy of the start.

—W. B. Yeats, “Why Should Not Old Men Be Mad?”

Come, my friends,
‘Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down;
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are –
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “Ulysses”
The two epigraphs above represent significantly disparate musings on the benefits or pitfalls of the experience of aging. From as early in my postsecondary education as I can remember, I have tended to gravitate toward the former, less sympathetic mindset about getting old. While I was still a teenaged undergraduate, I was keenly aware that I would invariably feel the effects of time in a painful way, and I routinely entertained fears that I would, someday, cease to be. I wasn’t sure about why I had these anxieties, or whether others shared similar fears, but I was aware of the shaping influence they had on my life. I suffered my first full-blown “midlife” crisis at 25, and spent a considerable amount of time negotiating the ways in which art, literature, music, film, and other humanistic endeavors engaged ideas of both growing up and growing old.

Happily, there were fields of study at the university that were also, at least in part, preoccupied with such concerns, as well as some of the other things about which young people are frequently passionate: love and human intimacy, beauty and the search for “truth,” social justice, democracy, and everything else that I might pursue to help make the world a better place. Indeed, I found a humanities curriculum that was not only willing to assist me in exploring these burning issues, but I made friends with fellow humanities students who had similar interests, passions, and fears. Predictably, I became an English major.

Throughout my undergraduate years, I was introduced to a multitude of great writers, of both poetry and prose, but I have always kept a special place in my heart for those who echoed my fears and anxieties about getting old—Yeats, Thomas Hardy, T. S. Eliot, and others who also lamented that one would (if lucky) wrinkle up, gray over, and slowly lose the things that seemed most vital to a young reader. I remember the shivers I would get in reading Yeats’s final lines from “Politics”:

And maybe what they say is true
Of war and war’s alarms,
But O that I were young again
And held her in my arms.²

I fondly recall how, after nights of drinking and other youthful debaucheries, my friends and I would gather in candlelit dorm rooms to recite “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” and how I would, when it was my turn to read, often have difficulty in holding back the tears, regardless of my perhaps imperfect understanding of what it