# Wrinkles in Time

At The first time I realized that I was aging, I was at an outdoor concert. I was sitting in a chair, listening to a jazz band, drinking a beer. All of the sudden, I noticed that the skin of the girl who was sitting in front of me looked different from what I was used to seeing in the mirror. Her skin had that shiny elasticity associated with youth that I took for granted and never noticed until it was gone, never noticed until that moment. That was a turning point for me because for the first time, I realized that I was no longer particularly young. I was 35 at the time.

I recently turned 37 and the whole issue of aging and growing older has taken on an unfamiliar significance. I no longer get carded to see R-rated movies or to buy a 6-pack of beer; the local oldies radio station plays the songs of "my generation;" I'm getting wrinkles; my hair is turning gray; and injuries that I used to be able to shake off take a couple of days to heal. More significantly, for the first time in my life, I understand that I don't have forever to reach my goals. Life is finite, and I have so much that I want to do and so many things that I want to accomplish that I feel overwhelmed. And of course I find myself looking backwards, wondering what the hell I was thinking when I wasted all that time. I feel like I spent the first 18 years of my life ducking punches and dreaming about running away, and the next 18 years running from the pain of the first 18 years. And now, at 37, tired of running and wounds mostly intact, I feel like I'm starting over.

Yikes! I am starting over! And this time, I realize that I am the captain of my own destiny. I am excited about the possibilities and terrified of the responsibility. When I focus on what I can do, I feel charged. I imagine myself living a life that I love and my fear of mortality shrinks into the background. In these dreams, I am completely alive.

But, perhaps because I can hear the clock ticking in my head, I am well aware of the risks. This time, I have to pay for the journey myself. There's no one out there to buy my gas for me, no stipends, no fellowships, no umbilical cord to my parents' bank about. If this venture goes bust, I'm the one that goes bankrupt.

And even more frightening is the prospect of getting it all wrong again. I thought that I was following my heart the last time I planned out my life, but somehow I ended up at a dead end, lost, hopeless, and emotionally dead. For the last 8 or so years, I have felt like I was just going through the motions. I finished my Ph.D. not so much because I particularly cared about it anymore, but because I had started it and couldn't quit what I had started. I poured myself into my work even though I had no passion about it,

because I that's what I was "supposed" to do. And now, because I have felt what it is like to feel alive, the thought of "What if this is not it, either?" echoes in the back of my mind, sometimes inaudibly and other times so loudly that it's all I can hear.

My experience is not unique. Many women go through a similar existential crisis when they reach their middle to late thirties. Some women panic because what they see in the mirror is completely at odds with what they see on TV, in the movies and in magazines. Other women "wake up" and realize that they have invested so much energy into their husbands or partners and/or their children that they realize that they have lost touch with who they are and what they want. Others still come to realize that they are stuck in a relationship or career that leaves them feeling absolutely dead.

While the basic choices, stay the same or make a change, seem obvious, they are not easy. There are risks to either choice. And for many women, the difficulty is heightened because any choice they make will reverberate through all the relationships that they are in. For example, if I am focused on and angst ridden about losing my looks and I hold on to that fear, I will poison myself by condemning my looks. If I change and accept my aging face and skin, I risk (or at least fear) losing my husband or partner to a younger, more attractive woman. It is this fear of risk that paralyzes many women, locking them into choices that they choose inadvertently by not choosing. And because they don't recognize that they made a choice, they end up feeling all the more powerless.

It seems to me that the only way to avoid this complete sense of powerlessness is to consciously make a choice and to take ownership of that choice. In other words, in order to feel powerful, we must consciously take a risk. And hopefully, the risk pays off.

This article also appears on Suite101.com