

The Way Around to the North Is Still Open

Thanks to lots of snow and rain, our rivers are singing happy, highwater songs. It's rafting season! Get out your kayaks and Cataracts! The last few years I've been invited to join five other women on a self-supported raft trip. Ten years older than my raft-mates, I relish the chance to (try to) match their stamina, dexterity and endurance on the water, to reacclimate to sleeping in a tent, to perfect campsite culinary skills and to brave a skinny dip in cold water. I haven't yet heard from the group regarding the dates for this year. ...

My mother grew up sailing on [Buzzards Bay](#), a body of water off Massachusetts that boasts reliably steady winds. Just to the southwest is New Bedford which, in the 1800s, was the greatest whaling port and richest city (per capita) in the world. Herman Melville shipped out of New Bedford, his experiences inspiring him to write "[Moby Dick](#)." Decades later, when the idea of recreational sailing had taken hold, New Bedford was the birthplace of the Beetle Cat, a popular gaff-rigged day sailer. My mother's idea of heaven was to guide her jaunty catboat out of the harbor into the bay, returning hours later to drop the sail and snag the mooring, seemingly simultaneously. All this for its own fun sake, yes, but also in preparation for the highlight of her summer — the week each year she'd join three younger friends to explore the waters of Maine in a Concordia yawl.

I was home visiting my parents for the weekend. My mother and I sat talking in the living room, the French doors to the porch flung open to let in the salt-scented breezes off the bay.

"Who could it be?" she asked in response to a knock on the door. There, to her surprise, stood the owner of the yawl. She invited him in, peppering him with questions about the others on the crew, the plans for that summer's Maine adventure. Finally, he was able to get a word in. I'll never forget that moment, the look on my mother's face. Shock, disbelief, abject despair. He and the others had conferred and agreed that at her age it wasn't a good idea for her to go sailing with them. He was so sorry. His reasons, though well-intentioned, only added insult to injury: you might trip and fall, hard for you to get in and out of the dinghy... She stopped listening. This was the first time she'd been disqualified because of her age by someone else.

We oldsters know about the societal sidelining, the invisibility, the infantilization as we advance in age. Car keys taken away. Moved out of your home at the behest of your children. Talked about in third person. It's the loss of control. Bladders are the least of it. It's one thing when you decide for yourself. It's quite another, after a long life, when decisions are made for you. Of course, if we've lost our mental or physical capacities, others have to step in. But barring that, we can jolly well captain our own ship.

We are many things. Old now happens to be one of them. Let the many, not the one, define you. As a friend used to say, "The way around to the North is still open." If we remain clever, creative and preemptive, we can find ways around obstacles to a full and purposeful life in our 60s and beyond. Ageing is unknown territory, an adventure to be embraced. Here are some big-name examples of individuals who are: At 93, Clint Eastwood is heading into production for what he says might be his final film. Jerry Seinfeld has reserved Caesar's Palace for his 100th birthday in 2054. May 8th was Sir David Attenborough's 97th birthday. He remains unflinching in his

attempt to wake us up to the beauty and fragility of our planet. Eighty-nine-year-old Jane Goodall and 85-year-old Jane Fonda are sounding related calls to action. Closer to home, Sharon, a widow and approaching her ninth decade, still singlehandedly runs her boutique hotel in Mexico despite health setbacks that would cause most of us to turn tail and retire. With a wave of the hand, she refers to them as inconveniences. I am currently assisting a writer in his mid-70s with a manuscript about adult-onset of blindness...his. The pages are filled with courage and can-do. As Carl Reiner counsels in his documentary on ageing, "If you're not in the Obit, eat breakfast." As to the raft trip this summer? No word. Perhaps it's time to read between the lines. Just in case, I booked a float trip on the Snake River for this fall.