

Pacific Sun – Growing Old Gracefully
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by Jill Kramer

Each time Elizabeth Bugental begins a new chapter of her life, she takes it on with gusto. She entered a convent at age 21 with enthusiasm and certainty. Shortly after leaving 19 years later, she dove into a career as a psychotherapist and fell passionately in love. Now she's embracing old age with equal relish.

Bugental is no Mary Sunshine. She's grappled with plenty of hard times, and she expects more to come. But in nearly 79 years she has accumulated no regrets. And even though living long means living with loss, she's found unexpected pleasures as well.

She's compiled many of her musings on aging in a book published earlier this year, *AgeSong: Meditations for Our Later Years*. One of the lessons she's learned is that being of use to others brings her joy. So she and another retired psychologist, Ann Coffey, have begun a new discussion group for seniors at Family Service Agency of Marin, where men and women over 65 can make connections, share concerns and, perhaps, gain a deeper appreciation of life. Her motive for volunteering her time, she says, is purely selfish.

Bugental grew up in Los Angeles during the Depression in a devout Catholic family, the oldest of four children spread 18 years apart. She caught the drama bug early on, attending Immaculate Heart High School and College in Hollywood, and managed to combine her love of theater with convent life, earning a doctorate in Speech and Drama and heading the theater arts department at her alma mater. As it turned out, her education, backed by the convent, led to her break with the Church. She spent a year in Rome, working on her dissertation and becoming increasingly disillusioned with Vatican policies. At the same time, she began longing for the parts of life she had denied herself for so many years.

She married James Bugental, one of the early leaders of the humanistic psychology movement, and became licensed as a marriage and family therapist. The two shared a private practice for more than 20 years, always making their services available to low-income clients. When she retired 12 years ago, Bugental's dedication to serving the needy prompted her to volunteer at Family Service Agency, where she's worked ever since. (The agency celebrates its 60th anniversary with a fund-raising gala October 21.)

Bugental's husband suffered a stroke four years ago, wiping out most of his memory. On the day I visit he sits in the living room, his legs propped up in front of him and covered in a blanket, smiling as Bugental leads me out the back door to the garden. Their 15-year-old mutt, Dickens, follows us out. We sit at a green metal table shaded by an umbrella, surrounded by a riot of greenery and blossoms, as a fountain gurgles background music to our conversation. At one point, we hear her husband calling and Bugental bolts out of her chair, hurrying inside. Coming back, she tells me he'd heard someone at the door who was gone by the time she got there. She suspects it must have been the 5-year-old girl who lives across the street. "She likes to come over and play with me," says Bugental. "See, that's another thing that just arrives on my doorstep—seeing the world through the eyes of a 5-year-old. She's full of wonderment. I find that gifts are all around us."

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Why did you stop being a nun?

There are so many answers to that question. It was the '60s, is one answer. I was in a wonderful community of women and they sent me to Stanford to get a doctorate in Speech and Drama. I went to Rome for a year to write my dissertation, which was on an Italian dramatist. And I didn't like what I saw in terms of the separation between the Church and the people—the pomp and the ceremony. The Church didn't respect women and didn't seem to care for the poor. I just saw the dichotomy so much more strongly. And when I came home I felt I had to come to terms with it. But it wasn't all idealism and disillusionment with the Church. I'd also tasted some real freedom living alone in Rome. I started out living in a convent and couldn't bear the atmosphere, which was very different from everything I'd experienced here. It was very, very repressive. And the sisters that I lived with were like children. They had literally been collected from farms in Italy. It was such a different world. And my Superior actually gave me permission to move into a pensione right down the block from the Vatican. So I had a great deal of freedom.

Were there other reasons?

The other thing is that I wanted to live the part of my life I hadn't lived. That's the most basic reason. I just wanted to own my sexuality. I wanted an intimate relationship, a male partner, and maybe have children. And being free in the world. I loved walking into supermarkets when I first started doing that—having a credit card in my pocket and going into a store was a great experience! And having a sense of being a separate self, separate from the community, the church, so that I could find my own way—my own spirituality, my own personal belief system. That was sort of like growing up.

Was it a difficult decision?

I loved my community, so it was very hard. Because the women I was with really lived what I cared about, what I believed in. I wouldn't have landed here without all that wonderful help and support and preparation and care and sisterhood—real sisterhood. So if I had my life to live over, I wouldn't do it differently. I've sort of had everything. A lot of it was accidental, but nevertheless, I got it all.

Do you have children?

Jim and I have one daughter together. We've been married 37 years, but we didn't start until I was 41 and he was 52. I tried to get pregnant and couldn't. We adopted our daughter when she was 8-1/2. And we just had a grandson born. My husband has two children now in their 60s and two grown grandchildren who live on the East Coast, so we don't see a lot of them. So it was a wonderful thing to have this baby come into our lives. I'm old for a first-time grandmother. I'm almost 79, and my friends have great-grandchildren. My daughter waited until she was 40 to have a baby, so we're both late. But I'm glad that I'm this age for this because I have time to be completely in this experience. And because I'm at the other end of life and I know that I won't see him grow up, I treasure this moment so much more. Listening to his heartbeat all the time my daughter was in labor was like being in touch with the universe. At the same time, I'm dealing with my husband, who's 11 years older than I and had a stroke a few years ago.

How did you two meet?

I was in therapy with him before I had left the convent. My husband is a renowned therapist. My community paid for the therapy because I was so distraught when I came back from Rome and was going through all this upheaval. It was probably the hardest two years of my life. Then, after I left the convent and I was in therapy with someone else who worked in the same building as my husband, we met again. And we got married about two years later, in 1969. We were like 14-year-olds. It's wonderful to be 14 when you're 40. You know how to do it.

Much better than being 14 when you're 14. Was he your first love?

No. Before I went in the convent, I was actually engaged. My decision to enter the convent had a lot to do with the teachings of the Church around sexuality. Sexuality is an obsession with the Catholic Church. And we were so warned about acting out sexually and I was a good girl and I think I was very frightened about being a sinner, about not being good enough. [My fiancé] was observing my codes, but it was hard. I also think he was not the right man. He had been in the service and, at the time, all these servicemen were coming home and getting married instantly. I was in a sorority and everybody was so eager to settle down and have children and put the war behind them. And I was swept up in that, but then I had second thoughts, that maybe this isn't what I want to do.

But why join a convent?

I went to Immaculate Heart High School and College. I just loved this community of women who ran the high school and the college. I was very attached to them. And I was very idealistic and very Catholic. I associated spirituality with Catholicism. And as a high school student, I'd had several spiritual experiences that were very meaningful to me. It was during World War II and I was dating a lot of guys who were going off to war. And we were all very conscious of death. And Catholicism feeds into that because you learn that eternity is what it's really all about—not this life, but preparing for eternal life. So I felt, if that's the purpose of this life, I'd better do this one seriously. I also loved men, I can't say I didn't. But I was at that age when you want to put your whole self into something, and that seemed like the best place to do it. Until I was grown up, I associated everything that was good with Catholicism, because I was brought up in that world.

What were your parents like?

They were so wonderful. During the Depression, we took in relatives and everybody helped everybody. When I started out teaching elementary school, there was this little girl who basically told me she was being molested at home—and my mother took her in! She lived with my family for several years. And when I was teaching drama in college, there was a student who was Taiwanese who had lost her sponsor and would have had to go home—and my family took her in, too. And when she left, her brother came. He was a teenager at the time. He now lives in Los Angeles and he's married and has two grown sons and he's like my younger brother. So we have this whole branch of the family that is part Chinese.

Tell me about your father.

My father had studied to be a priest and he was very religious. My mother was, too, although not as obviously so as my father. He was a sales manager for a furnace company. We barely survived during the Depression. My mother worked as a secretary for \$2 a day to support us. My father was ill the first 10 years of my life, so my mother kept food on the table. She had insisted on going to business school before they were married in case she ever had to go to work.

That was farsighted.

Especially in those days. Women didn't do that then, they just got married. She was a smart lady. She lived to be 86. She died 10 years ago.

What was your father's illness?

He had a goiter, a serious growth on his thyroid, and it took a long time to remove and heal. He found work, but it was way below his talents. He'd been classically educated in a seminary in Canada. He knew French and German and was very well-read. And he was painting furnaces in the basement of this company. But they were getting correspondence from abroad and he could translate it. So eventually he graduated to being vice president of the company.

Do you have siblings?

I have a sister 18 months younger, one brother 10 years younger and another brother 18 years younger. My mother was 38 and, at that time, it was kind of shocking. Because that meant everyone knew what you were doing! But we were all ecstatic about it.

I would imagine, though, that at least the first son, born right in the middle of the Depression, would have been a financial hardship.

We counted our pennies, and we lived in rented houses and we moved a lot. Every time they decided to sell the house, we had to move. So we lived in a lot of different homes until I was in 8th grade, when we finally had a house of our own, and that was in Hollywood. Before that, we lived in West Los Angeles, more toward Beverly Hills. It sounds much more upscale than it was. But we always went to Catholic schools. Somehow my parents eked out the money for tuition, because they thought it was very important that we be in Catholic schools. But now everybody in my family has left the church. When my mom died, she was the only one who was still Catholic.

You no longer consider yourself Catholic?

No. I'm still very attached to the Gospel and the story of the life of Jesus. In its pure form. Who he was, what he did, what he felt, how he lived is still very important to me, and it's been a guiding factor in my life. I'm talking about "love your neighbor," the Sermon on the Mount. The only sins that Jesus ever talked about were hypocrisy and greed, and I go with that. The other one was not using your talents, and I go with that. But all the rest that gets attributed to Christianity is not in Jesus' Gospel. So I have to say I parted with the Catholic Church because I no longer could adhere to some of the its teachings. Adhering to the teachings of Jesus is not hard for me. But I cannot adhere to the place of women in the Church, the prescriptions against homosexuality, the terrible condemnation of birth control and planned parenting. Going to Third World countries and preaching against contraception feels to me like a terrible thing to do. And I could no longer be associated with that in any way. That had a lot to do with my leaving the convent. I could no longer represent something that I couldn't agree with.

Did you ever consider having a career in theater?

I really wanted to be a teacher, but I did enjoy performing. And I grew up in Hollywood, so how could you not think about it? The high school and college I went to were right in the middle of Hollywood, and a lot of the people I went to school with were performers' children or associated with movies in some way, so of course it was in our blood. We were all kind of theater-crazy. It was part of growing up.

After you left the convent, with all your background in drama, how did you make the transition to psychology?

There is a natural progression from drama to therapy because both are process-oriented. They both depend on looking inside to see what's going on and expressing yourself from there. So I was used to facilitating that process. While I was getting my master's degree I minored in speech therapy, which is almost all psychology, so that was a help. And I went back to school and got enough units for my MFT license, Marriage and Family Therapy. My husband was my mentor.

And now your relationship has turned upside down. How do you cope?

Jim and I have always fit perfectly. We always have been on the same wavelength. When I married him, I said it was because I would never be bored and that's been true, even to this day when he has no memory. He doesn't remember our life together, which is hard. [starts to tear up] But he knows me. And he can be in the moment. And if I went in right now and said I was upset about something, he would be there.

So he doesn't remember his own life, either?

He remembers a lot of things from his early years, but nothing from about 30 on. He says things to me like, "I'd like to write a book." And I tell him, "You've written seven books." And I get the books and I show them to him and he says, "Oh, well, I'm glad I didn't just think about it." [laughs] He's very funny. And he's very present. I take him three mornings a week to a senior group and they love him and he loves being there. He's very social. And at one time, that would have been a waste of time to him. He was more of an introvert, writing and thinking all the time and being a therapist and teaching therapists. That was his life. Always producing, creating a new workshop, a new this, a new that. He would not have ever sat for three hours with a bunch of people he had nothing in common with and talk or play games. He does now. And it's really beautiful. That's why I'm so devoted to the notion of peers for elders now. Because we're all in the same boat, in a way, even though we haven't had the same lives. We're dealing with so many of the same issues. We're dealing with deep, existential issues, and you can't avoid that when you get old. Not if you stay awake.

Did he recognize you immediately after the stroke?

Yes, but I don't know if he could have told you my name. But he knew who I was, and depended on me, deeply. I'm writing a chapter now for a book on caretaking, about how to take care of yourself while you're taking care of someone else. A whole component of care is waiting and watching and not being able to do much. Waiting to see who's going to emerge after this crisis.

Waiting to see who's going to emerge from him or from you?

Both, actually. That's a good question. Because one of the things we did well was converse. We traveled a lot. We lived in Spain for a year and we went to India and we had lots to talk about and ideas to exchange. And that person isn't there. Something else is, and that's my job, to find who is there, and make my peace with who he is now. It sounds much harder than it is, as it turns out.

It sounds awful.

I know. I don't know why I'm perfectly happy doing this. I love him, obviously. But it seems like the person I love is really the essence of him, who's still here. And when I really think of things being tragic, it's when he dies. Which he probably will do before me. Then talk to me—I might be a basket case. I don't know.

Tell me about the support group you're starting.

The idea is to build a network of peers, going through the same things. I've been having a wonderful time meeting new people my age because, when you start talking about the real things, the internal things, it's as if you know each other. One of the problems is that people get isolated at this age. Maybe they move to be near a son or daughter, but the son or daughter has a very busy life and they end up spending a lot of time alone—through nobody's fault, it's just the way it works. Or they lose a spouse and during the grieving process they withdraw. It's very easy to withdraw when you're feeling sad all the time. Or they have a physical disability which makes it harder to get around, and pretty soon it seems like it's not worth the effort.

So this purpose of the group is to help older people form new friendships.

And to give people a place to talk about what really matters. Everybody who's older is dealing with loss. There's no way that you can get older without dealing with loss. You're losing your friends, maybe you've lost a spouse, you've lost your parents. And every day there's something that happens that reminds you of the end of life. So we carry around the awareness that life is short.

Can you say what is the most surprising thing about growing older?

[long pause] The discovery of other parts of myself that I hadn't paid enough attention to, that I'd been too busy to acknowledge. Like what really makes me happy, in the moment, not in the global sense. What I want in this moment, right now. Because time is limited. Because I live with a man without a memory, I'm aware that this moment is all I have. And I am talking to you from my heart because that's what I like. I don't like chitchat. I would much rather tell you the truth about what's going on. That gives me joy. And I've heard a lot of older people say they have more choice. Even though the body is giving out, you're more in touch with yourself and who you are and you make better choices. You don't have all the pulls of a job and children and keeping up and achieving and competing and winning and being beautiful. You have to let go of all those things and it leaves a lot of space. And it's just so beautiful to sit and look at the flowers or enjoy whatever's happening, whatever is here, now. It's a luxury.

What prompted you to write the book?

The thing that made me write the book is that I feel sad for people who don't get to have this life phase, who don't get to be old. It seems like a loss. This is such a wonderful time of life. And people who die young don't get to see it. I'm surprised that it's so good. I thought it would be awful to be old. And it turns out to be really good! And the world is in such a mess. Don't get me started on that. Sometimes I feel helpless, but you can always write a letter or make a phone call. That's the other part about being old, is that I can do that.

With authority.

Exactly! I can say, damn it, I know something, and this is wrong!

You can get away with a lot more when you're old.

You can, that's true! People are intimidated, and that's good! [laughs] I never was able to intimidate anybody and now I can, and I'm so glad! Who would hit an old lady?

Jill Kramer is a staff writer for the Pacific Sun.