

Meanwhile ...

Many thoughts have continued to course through my head following the last blog piece I wrote a few weeks ago, “Patriarchal Plague.” The thoughts not only course through my head, but blaze through my heart too as I continue to identify how patriarchal schema has threaded its way so pervasively through my existence and experience up until now, and I daresay will continue unless I interrupt it in some definitive way, as I am attempting to do.

Identifying it is certainly vital, but what to do then is another matter. All those of us who are well along in our three-score years and ten and hoping for another decade or two on top of that, are very aware that the years left to us matter. Many of us have spent many years, many decades even, attending to roles and tasks agreed to or allotted to us because that’s just how it was supposed to be, or as a way of helping fulfil the hopes and dreams we and others held, only to realise we still haven’t really inhabited our own existence yet. We’re always referenced to or by someone else’s needs or the place we have in their lives. Meanwhile ...

Many of us are also what they call the “sandwich generation”, meaning we have very active roles in the lives of our grandchildren while still carrying a significant caring role in the lives of our elderly parents. But many of us are also still navigating daily life within a less than blossoming domestic partnership, despairing of even breath or moments to explore what might actually have meaning to us outside of all those roles. Certainly grandparenting is precious, and I particularly cherish this because I like who I am when I’m with my grandchildren. It gives me joy and great meaning to be with them, and also because it’s when I feel most connected to myself. Of course I don’t have the energy to parent them 24/7 and I’m glad they have their own parents to do this, but I do enjoy having a “turn” with them and am grateful.

But what about the me that’s not one of the roles I wear? The sense of identity that is not quite whole. I know I’m not alone in this as I find more and more places that talk of a crisis of identity or meaning or purpose or existence. One writer I follow is developing a whole discussion point and field around what he calls “existential health” (Jim Palmer). Those from religious backgrounds can be particularly vulnerable. And Gen Z is evidently particularly vulnerable because they measure their worth by likes and followers on Instagram or TikTok rather than for who they actually are in their human context. But I think anyone raised within a patriarchal framework will relate to this too because we were raised for our future roles rather than for who we are if we can just inhabit our own humanness and be that person. I’m sitting here at this moment. Who am I really, and what is actually important to me?

Bringing this back to the situations that bring our cohort together, some months ago I read an article shared on a Facebook page “Echoes of Women” and the content creator was referencing an author Kristen Arnett in her book “Mostly Dead Things.”

I haven't read the book, but what stood out to me was how this woman explained feeling like she'd lived inside her (late) husband's clenched fist. I could already relate. Little things like habits that seem small but are actually control. Learning to adjust our opinions because our real ones don't go over well in a conversation. Deferring preferences about restaurants, holidays, paint colours, what movie or series to watch. Someone else named Donald Winnicott talks about the "personality someone builds in order to comply with what's demanded of them that's so thorough that even the person wearing it stops noticing it's on. We live inside it, and no-one questions it because it works". I could share more of this, but if you're on Facebook maybe search for the page "Echoes of Women" and read her post on 23rd April 2026. I may actually order the book she's talking about.

Is this where we're all sitting, meanwhile? While life goes on, daily living within the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) controls of someone who needs to contain or compartmentalize their environment including the people in it. What would us older ones want to say to the younger ones who are earlier on in their relationship journeys with a neurodiverse adult? We know it's not often reasonable or practical to leave when there's a whole family life scaffolded together by the partnership, but perhaps us older ones would want to remind the younger ones to remember who you are. The you that you are underneath all the layers and roles and relationships that allocate your daily doings and being. Find her. Find him. Find them. Care for them. Start now.

We still regularly refer back to ASPIA's Self-Care Suggestions (still available on the website) – a wonderful list and guide put together about twenty years ago in an ASPIA meeting where everyone contributed what helps them cope, what keeps them connected to themselves and to community. I'm sure we could write an even more comprehensive list now, but at the top I would want to remind and encourage partners to find a way to reconnect with who you are and what you like and what you want from your remaining days, years or decades. We want to be able to look back and know we gave ourselves an opportunity to make some choices for our own fulfilment, peace and joy, no matter how much opposition we encountered or what obstacles appeared in our way.

The "clenched fist" may remain for the time being for many, but meanwhile maybe we can find a gap or space where we can give ourselves permission to step out or away for a few hours, for a day, for a weekend, or step into an experience or context we've been wishing to try, something for our own interest or nourishment and not just in keeping with our "roles". The years will keep passing, make them mean more for you and not just what they mean for those you care for.

Meanwhile.

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<https://www.carolgriggcounselling.com.au/post/meanwhile>