

Chandler-Tullamore Sister Cities Southwest Tea
Keynote Address on November 2017

You are the Perfect Age

BY JAN WHALEN



Thank you for that kind introduction, Ellen. I'm grateful to all those who worked so hard to make this a beautiful and memorable event. What a lovely group of women and men you are! Without you, there would be no party. I want to also thank Ross for coming to a tea on a Saturday morning to support me.

This is a wonderful day to gather together to celebrate the sisterhood of Chandler and Tullamore. While these two cities are oceans apart, the people share a familiar bond, and it feels grand to recognize this association today.

Last summer, our travel agents Maureen and Jack, from Sullivan's travels, arranged for my husband Ross and me to visit Tullamore. I'm curious. How many of you in the room have been to Tullamore? Then you know first-hand about the Tullamore Dew Center, and places like the Charleville Castle and of course, the King Oak. It's the perfect city to twin with Chandler.

Time and Age

Today our goal is to think more clearly about age. Not just any age, but your age. And not just your age but your perfect age. Yes, I know there are some days when we don't feel like we are living our perfect age; but it is true. Here's a question for you: If you had to choose just one age to call perfect, which number would you choose?

Everyone has their favorite age, but usually I hear, "I'd like the body of this age, but I want to keep what I know from that age."

I used to think 25 was perfect. In fact, I cried the day I turned 30, because I thought my life was over. How many of us could write a book about the times we felt our lives were over? And yet, we're still here!

John O'Donohue, one of my favorite Irish authors, compares age to the various seasons of the year. Springtime is when we are just beginning. In summer everything is in full bloom. Fall is time to harvest what we've planted, and in winter, we become peaceful and private—some call it cocooning. When you think about it, these seasons come to us many times during this one lifetime.

You are the Perfect Age

The book, *You are the Perfect Age* was a harvesting time for me. In the book, I've interviewed decade changing women turning 10, 20, 30—all the way up to 100. I asked them four questions and when the responses began to come in, I was surprised—even inspired with their answers and that's when I decided to share their wisdom with a larger audience.

The 10-year-old said that girls could do anything boys could do—which was not what women in my generation had been taught. It was difficult to get much information from the 20-year-old, but then I remembered what it was like to be 20, not knowing the direction of my life. Of course, I communicated with her on Facebook Messenger. And so it went. Each woman's answers offered a slice of life from her decade.

We spent a lot of time on the design and the illustrations of the women, because our number one goal was to honor each age. Shireen, my graphic designer selected different shaped circles of pink, blue and aqua for each page. Circles were chosen to express the belief that each woman is unique, whole and complete—just like a circle.

I'm not only delighted with how this book has been received, it's given me the opportunity to speak to women's groups about the topic of age, and also to be tested. Is it really true that we are the perfect age? Each time I consider this question, I am more convinced that the answer is yes. We could talk about many aspects of age, but for today, let's focus on three words: Perfect, Contradictions and Connections.

What is Perfect?

Perfect is a word that gets bandied around quite a bit. We're probably most familiar with the definition of perfect where something is completely free of faults or defects. I won't ask for a show of hands, but I am willing to bet that many of us begin our day by looking at our faces in the mirror, taking note of what might not be perfect. Even beauty queens obsess about this.

What would happen if we used nature as a guide for perfect? Sometimes I envy natural spaces because when we walk out into the woods, or into the desert, we meet great beauty. We feel relaxed, we breathe more deeply, and we feel at home.

But what's even more amazing, is, we look around and think nothing of a branch lying on the ground, or pieces of cactus scattered about or weeds growing everywhere. No one says, "Get a rake, get rid of this. Lift this, tuck that—it's a mess!"

Nature is allowed to be wild, and we see the perfect in the imperfect with total acceptance. It's as if Mother Nature says, "Relax. Take me just as I am." Wouldn't it be great to regard ourselves in the same way?

There are many wonderful attractions in Tullamore, but my most favorite place, by far, was getting to meet the King Oak. When you visit Tullamore, skip everything else if you have to, but see this beauty, because no picture can capture its spirit.

And to me, with all due respect to those who have named this tree a King Oak, it has the spirit of a Queen. First of all, she hides her age— some say she's 400-800 and others say 900 years old. She has the normal branches that go up, yet many extend outward, close to the ground, in an embrace that says, "Come play here." And people do! They gather under her branches for picnics, dates or just to climb around. Did you know that she was entered into a tree-beauty contest? And like an ancient mentor, there are lovely green plants growing on her branches.

When the hurricane hit Ireland a few weeks ago, I asked about the Oak but was told, "Nothing can touch her. She is a warrior in the wind." A warrior in the wind. I like that.

If you think about the storms you have endured in your life, you can also feel like a warrior in the wind. T.S. Eliot's advises us to do one more than endure the storms of life. He says: "We had the experience but missed the meaning. And, approach to the meaning restores the experience in a different form." I agree. Reflection shows us the perfection of our life's journey. Here's an example from my life:

I was living in Cedar Rapids Iowa, a few years ago, when I applied for graduate school at the University of Iowa. I worked really hard to be admitted, but in the end, they wrote me a rejection letter, which made me angry and bitter. It was one of those times I thought my life was over.

But a few weeks later, I found out about a masters degree in Servant Leadership through another college. I enrolled, and spent the next three years in academic heaven with fifteen really bright women. We wrote papers and discussed such topics as building community, ethics, and the common good.

I cannot begin to explain the number of benefits I received through this opportunity. So instead of cursing the University of Iowa, I thank them and my lucky stars for closing one door so that I was free to walk through another, better door. What I thought was a tragedy, was instead—perfect.

Perhaps you've had similar experiences. See yourself as a natural wonder of the divine Creator. Age is not a dreaded disease, but rather your PERFECT moment in time.

Accept the Contradictions Within

We used to say, "Girls are sugar and spice and everything nice," but the following quote more accurately describes a real woman and introduces us to our second word—contradictions. Here's the quote: "There's a fire in her. If loved correctly, she will warm your entire home. If abused, she will burn it down."

With each passing birthday, I see contradictions in myself: I think of myself as a kind person, yet I've said mean spirited things. I'm usually organized, yet I sometimes lose important things, like car keys. I consider myself wise, but I make foolish choices. I have two contradictory sides.

Age is also contradictory. Sometimes we love it, sometimes we lie about it.

Yes, facing a new birthday can be exhilarating, but also a little scary. Last spring, in Ann Niemann's magazine, *The Desert Shamrock*, she made a comment about the ancient mapmakers. It seems as if when they got to places in the world that had not yet been explored, they simply wrote the words: "Here be Dragons." Doesn't that describe stepping into a new decade for many of us?

I love what Niamh (originally from Dublin), the 30-year-old from *You are the Perfect Age* says: "I'm, scared and excited to find out what this next decade has in store for me, but I'm strapped in and ready to take the next ride."

Looking back into the history of our Irish roots, a woman with sharp contrasts was Grace O'Malley. She was born in County Mayo in 1530. She's called Ireland's Pirate Queen. Her dad was the lord of the O'Malley dynasty and when she was very young, she chopped off her hair to look like a boy, so she could go to sea with him and his crew. And after that, her dad probably thought, "I'd better train her myself as she loves the sea and will not be kept from her passion."

Yet she married, had three children and enjoyed her femininity. After her husband's death she became the Queen of the Land and Sea. History tells us that in order to get one of her sons out of an English prison, she made a trip to England to meet personally with Queen Elizabeth I. Here were two women living in what was considered a man's world. Even though they were enemies, when they met, they recognized a shared fierceness of spirit, and perhaps under different circumstances, would have been friends.

When we visited Tullamore last summer, Ellen Harrington told us that a woman we'd never met would show us around. I wasn't sure who would take the time to do this, but then I didn't know Camilla Cullen. After meeting her, and many of you might agree, she holds some of the qualities of Grace O'Malley—without the pirate's sword, of course.

Camilla is a fierce defender of her family, her beloved city, and her Irish legacy, yet she is one of the most generous hosts I've ever met. Her daughter describes both sides of her mother:

Saidhbhe told me: "The main thing I adore about mam is the way she raised myself and my three sisters to be strong women and to work hard for what we want, not taking anything for granted, not to give in to anybody or settle for anything less than what we are passionate about."

But on the other hand: “Her love of feeding and hosting people from close friends and family to complete strangers is a powerful thing to be able to do. I have seen time and time again others asking her for motherly advice, and she empowers whoever she is talking to, which is rare in a world full of vanity, power-lust and selfishness.”

There’s a benefit of knowing strong women with Irish roots. Through our exchange, we get to meet the many sides of ourselves.

The qualities we notice and admire in others—determination and strength of character, for example—sometimes lie dormant within us, but when these qualities are expressed in someone else, we recognize them, and they wake up in us. We grow and are changed through the push and pull of hard and soft qualities, and we assimilate them into our daily thoughts, words and actions.

So as women, we nurture and we defend. We listen and we give advice to each other. We make mistakes and we get back up to do it again, with the intention to do it better. But this all takes time. It takes time to live, reflect and grow into your own life.

I love what John O’Donohue says about recalling memories in his first book *Anam Cara*: “To visit the temple of memory is not merely to journey back to the past; it is rather to awaken and integrate everything that happens to you. It gives depth to the experience.” I love how women braid the good, the bad and the valiant aspects of themselves together. Yet, it takes time to grow into your authentic life. But it is truly worth the effort.

Irish Connections

One of my favorite words to talk about is connections. As we age, our web of connections is more complex than the roots of the great tree of Tullamore. Think about the friends you have known from the different chapters of your life. While most oak tree roots lie only eighteen inches under the soil, I’m sure most of us feel the depth of the friendships that bless us during our lifetime. Who knew this could happen?

For years, I’ve heard people say, “When you get older, it’s harder to make new friends.” But after many moves and many friends, I find that statement completely untrue. With each passing year, friends of all seasons and reasons come into our lives. And even when you lose touch with someone for years or even decades, and then see them again, it’s as if nothing has changed. We must remember to bless our connections.

On a grander scale, building connections was the intent of establishing the sister cities program by President Eisenhower sixty-one years ago. He felt that if we knew each other, we’d like each other, and help each other. And that would make us more prosperous and bring world peace. It is no small thing you are doing here with the Chandler-Tullamore sister city partnership!

Youth Ambassador, Lindsey O’Dell, gives us a perfect example of how this works in real life. She admits that when she first met her Irish exchange student, it was awkward. She couldn’t even pronounce the girl’s name. But things soon changed. They began to talk with each other, know each other and they realized they are so much alike, they now call each other twins.

When Arizona Rose Lauren Koll speaks about her Rose of Tralee experience in Ireland last summer, she emphasizes the connection rather than the competition. She’s excited to have new friends from all over the world and loves being the one who gets to make appearances and speak to inspire others to get connected with their Irish Roots.

And why is this important?

It’s important to stay connected to our Irish roots, no matter where you were born, and even if you’re not Irish, because that’s where we find our values. America is a country of great diversity of thought, and so the values we see in places like Tullamore, and in Irish groups here in the states are worth cultivating over a lifetime. We want to

make sure we remember that we are people who practice hospitality, loyalty, generosity, humility and at the same time, we are people who are happy about life.

Connections cut through generations. It's a good idea for us to follow Elizabeth Dole's advice, "When you're up, reach down, and when you're down, reach up." This statement can be taken many ways. Lauren got involved with the Irish community by reaching up to her grandmother. We also, can be inspired by those who have come before us, and share what we have learned with our peers and those from Lauren's generation—and if we listen, we can even learn from them.

Final Thoughts

It truly is the perfect time to redefine your perception of the perfect age, to accept the contradictions in your life, and cherish your connections. I often think of what mom showed me one day as we were looking at her plants. She said, "Look at these bright green leaves on the end of this philodendron — when you see new growth, you know the plant is alive and healthy."

New growth also keeps us dynamic, and excited for each day. So instead of bemoaning, "I'm getting older," realize that you are a survivor—a warrior of life. You have wisdom and lessons and it is true that you are the perfect age:

To accept and integrate all of your experiences.

To cherish the many friends who support you.

And to immerse yourself into the projects that call to your heart.

And it all begins with loving your perfect age.