

Speech: Fifty Shades Of Grey

A speech by John Zimmer (<https://mannerofspeaking.org>)

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Semifinalist, World Championship of Public Speaking, 2018. If you view a lot of contests, you'll always find some speeches that don't win one of the top three trophies but do win a place in your memory. This is one of them because I both enjoyed it and learned from it. I hope you do, too...

Mr. Contest Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen,
I have a confession.
One morning several years ago-
I was looking in the bathroom mirror-
And I realized that somehow-
Impossibly-
There were grey hairs on my head.
As time passed the grey hairs began to multiply-
So in retaliation-
I did something I never thought I would do-
Much less admit-
I got my hair colored.
And if you're thinking-
"Hang on, you don't have enough hair left for that"-
You're not wrong.

I will always remember my first time in the salon-
Sitting in front of another mirror-
Big blob of foam on my head-
Women to either side-
With their hair in pins or curlers or some weird aluminum foil-
Each of them giving me a look that said-
"Welcome to the club . . . next up . . . Botox."

This is the kind of thing that happens when you get older-
Your joints get stiffer-
Your wrinkles get wrinkles-
Your hair goes grey-
Or just . . . goes.
And if you haven't experienced these things yet-
Don't worry-
They're coming.
Because we are all getting older-
But we don't have to grow old.

For many years-
I was old-
In here. [*points to head*]
Too old to develop new skills-
Too old to take a chance-
Too old to make a change.
Have you ever known some like that?
Have you ever *been* someone like that?
In my defense-
I'm a lawyer-
We're born old.
We think we know everything-
And everything has to be just so.

After law school-
I joined a big law firm in Toronto-
And my future was set.

Work hard for several years-
Then become partner.
Then work hard for several years-
Then retire.
One Friday afternoon-
After six years of sixty-hour work weeks-
Three partners called me to a board room.
This was it-
Partnership-
The holy grail.
They sat me down and they said,
"You haven't brought in enough new clients-
You're not going to make partner-
You should start looking for a new job."
I was stunned-
And I was scared-
Because I had a family to support-
And I was 36 years . . . old.
Who would want to hire someone that age? *[lots of laughter]*
I can laugh at it today as well-
But at the time I wasn't laughing.
And that day was followed by a lot of sleepless nights.

Of course I began my job search immediately-
And after several nervous months-
I received an offer-
To review lease agreements for an insurance company.
Nothing glamorous-
But it was a job-
And I was going to take it-
When . . . another offer arrived-
A one-year-contract with the United Nations in Geneva.
I couldn't believe it-
When I was younger--
I dreamed of working for the UN-
And now here it was-

In Switzerland.
Diplomacy-
Mountains-
And chocolate.
But I had a secure offer in Canada-
Could I take that chance?
Wasn't I too old?

I struggled with my decision-
Until one night I looked for inspiration in a book of quotes-
And I read something that author Norman Vincent Peale said,
Live your life and forget your age.
Live your life and forget your age.
I chose the United Nations.
And that one-year contract-
Turned into 18 wonderful years helping people around the world.

A few years ago I was ready for another change.
My work was still fulfilling-
But after nearly two decades of UN bureaucracy-
I was ready for another change-
And I wasn't 36 anymore-
I was in my 50's-
Still am . . . still am.
But I wasn't old.
I made plans to start my own business-
And submitted my resignation.
My colleagues were amazing-
They said, "We heard you're leaving at your age - are you crazy?"
I wasn't crazy-
I was just younger than I had been in years.
Live your life and forget your age-
That's what I did-
That's what I'm trying to do.

As we get older-
We need to take care of our bodies.
We need to exercise-
Moisturize-
And sometimes tranquilize.
And if you ever want to get your hair colored-
Go ahead-
Why not?
Why settle for 50 shades of grey?-
When you can have 50 shades darker.

But more important than the grey hair on your head-
Is the grey matter inside.
The grey matter-
Matters more.
Make it 50 shades younger.
Samuel Jackson didn't get his big break in film until Pulp Fiction-
He was 45.
Ray Kroc sold paper cups most of his career until he franchised McDonald's-
He was 55.
Grandma Moses, one of America's most beloved and iconic painters,
Didn't start painting until the arthritis in her hands was so bad
She could no longer knit-
She was 75.
Whenever I struggle with being a first-time entrepreneur-
And I do struggle-
It's people like them who inspire me to keep going.

These days when I look in the mirror-
I still see the grey-
But I also think of my favorite lyric from a Bob Dylan song-
I was so much older then; I'm younger than that now. [sings this line]
When you look in the mirror-
Don't just see what's on the outside-
See what's underneath.
Keep growing-

But don't grow old.

Live your life and forget your age-

Forget your age and live your life.

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Brian Woolf's Comments: Fifty Shades of Grey has a risqué connotation, so a speech with that title and "I have a confession" as opening words, certainly jangled my curiosity bells. I was captured at the proverbial "hello" and John held me thereafter with his witty word use and his unexpected serious, relevant message-"Live your life and forget your age." It was a message made credible and convincing by his own life journey; the exceptional examples of some late-blooming oldies; and Bob Dylan's reinforcing, repeatable refrain: "Ah, but I was so much older then-I'm younger than that now." The speech was thoughtful, humorous, and left me on a high. Thanks, John.

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And there's more where this came from...

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