

THE SET FREE LIFE

Excellent Aging

The "I'm old" remark has been rearing its ugly head around me again these days, and I detest it, particularly from people who should be celebrating their youth. I've written about this previously (in my October 2008 newsletter, available on my website). No 30-something human being should be announcing fragility or senility and, really, neither should any 40- or 50- or 60-something in relatively good health. Just last week I heard [Jean Chatzky](#), the financial guru, tell an audience that our retirement plans should be calculated with the intent that we will live to age 95 or 100 because, friends, that's the reality. We're living longer, so to start sinking into "I'm old" four or five decades before it's necessary is nuts. I know we're all getting older, but the comment is usually heavy with unkind meanings that just don't bode well for future happiness.

Here's proof: the journal *Psychological Science* published findings in March of a study conducted first in 1968, with a follow-up last year questioning the original participants, who were under age 50 in the first survey. Melinda Beck reported in the *Wall Street Journal* that the findings indicate those who have gloomy stereotypes about aging "were significantly more likely to have had heart attacks or strokes than those who held positive views." She noted the researchers accounted for other factors but could not escape the conclusion that if you think aging is an unhappy experience, so shall your aging be.

Read that again. If you think older people are routinely helpless, or always forgetful, or hopelessly out of touch, or generally dull on the uptake, then those things may be what awaits you. Why? Because if you view aging as some sort of inevitable decline into feebleness, you may fulfill that belief by not taking care of yourself in ways that ensure your older years are filled with energy and vitality. You might think it's not worth the trouble of quitting smoking or losing weight, since "I'm old anyway, and it's too late now to change." If, on the other hand, you are positive about growing

older and see the coming decades as opportunities for growth, wisdom, and constructive life changes, you are probably more prone to looking out for your health, preparing confidently for favorable transitions, and approaching the years ahead with hopeful anticipation.

Sometimes it's hard not to see edging up in years as a good thing, especially if your experience is with those of seriously declining health and mental abilities. We may fear the passing of years that signifies we are almost at the age of those images we hold. But as Beck points out, "positive role models are all around," and I, for one, have always been on the lookout for these examples of excellent aging. They are my heroes! My pediatrician, Dr. Henrietta Marquis of Charleston, West Virginia, a woman who still inspires happy memories among Kanawha Valley inhabitants, decided at age 72 to return to medical school and do a residency in child psychiatry. She practiced until her death (well into her 90s) and I carry the enchantment of this statement she made to the local newspaper just a couple of years before she passed: "I'd love to write my memoirs but I'm just too busy."

I know that for some, health issues are already a challenge and it's hard to gather the emotional strength to press forward with optimism. Dr. Marquis couldn't get around without a walker in the last years of her life; I watched my father decline with Alzheimer's. There are scary possibilities up ahead. But what's coming is still mostly within your control, and your approach to it is everything. Years ago, I cut a small item out of a magazine and have had it on my desk ever since—a little piece with the headline, "Want to give up? Think you're too old for something new? Consider these examples."



Sue Thompson is a personality expert, etiquette trainer, and an instructor in life lessons. Her seminars on recognizing and developing talent, identifying personalities and working effectively with the people who possess them, responding appropriately to difficult experiences, treating others with respect, and behaving like a professional have caused listeners at companies and business organizations throughout the country to rate her presentations as "the best seminar of the conference!" She trains those entering the workforce how to present themselves with style and authority; new employees in the importance of respecting one's work and the workplace; managers in the value of understanding employees' talent and temperament; and everyone in the timeless rules of behavior that will always bespeak excellence.

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Listed are some accomplishments of the notable elderly. Here are a few:

- Golda Meir was 71 when she became prime minister of Israel.
- Painter [Grandma Moses](#) didn't start painting until she was in her 70s. She completed over 1,500 paintings after that; 25 of those were produced when she was past 100.
- S.I. Hayakawa retired as president of San Francisco State University at 70, then was elected to the U.S. Senate.
- Michelangelo was 71 when he painted the Sistine Chapel.
- Physician and humanitarian Albert Schweitzer was still performing operations in his African hospital at 89.

We aren't all Albert Schweitzers or Golda Meirs, but we can all decide that if we have anything to do with it, we'll be as productive in our own sphere, in our own ways, as these marvelous folks. Decide to age excellently! 🐾

Teddy Bear Says...



Thanksgiving has just passed, and Teddy Bear is inquiring: how did your gatherings go? Were you able to engage with friends and family without tempers flaring, epithets flying, and ruinous frustration besetting your holiday meal? If so, good for you! If not—let's talk, because there are more holiday events to come.

It seems to be a universal human joke that family celebrations must necessarily involve discord. The truth is, of course, that many gatherings are scenes of honest festivity and

enjoyment. People don't fight unholy traffic and nightmarish airline trips purely out of obligation, only to feud; many truly *want* to be where home is or where it feels like family because that's what holidays are about for them. They cherish their times together and have many good memories of past delicious meals, emotional reunions, hysterically funny stories, touching revelations, and more.

But the theme of eye-rolling resignation and a march to the home of relatives as though a gun is being held to the head prevails. For those of you for whom this is real life, keep this ancient mantra in mind: If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Quotable

In spite of illness, in spite even of the archenemy sorrow, one can remain alive long past the usual date of disintegration if one is unafraid of change, insatiable in intellectual curiosity, interested in big things, and happy in small ways.

Edith Wharton

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Let's break that down. First, *if it is possible*. This implies that there are times when it simply is *not* possible, but this is rare, isn't it? It *is* possible to be at peace with others—if we are willing to remain calm, or walk away, or take a deep breath, or refuse to become involved in others' problems or extreme passions. Embrace the apothegm of "Charlie Brown" cartoonist Charles Schulz: "No problem is so formidable that you can't walk away from it." Ask yourself if your engagement will change another's opinion. Will inserting yourself in the middle of an argument fix anything? Help anyone? How many times have you tried to step in and make people play nice and been bitten for it? Some humans can be nasty dogs (a sad reference, as far as I'm concerned). If it's possible, stay out of it. Don't engage. Plaster a smile on your face and become an Academy Award-winning actor. Pretend you cannot become irritated or frustrated. Listen for a while for politeness' sake and then find something to do in the kitchen, or suddenly remember a phone call that needs to be made. Rise above! It's possible!

Then, *as far as it depends on you*. I've never seen a man or woman dragged kicking and screaming into a family dispute or a political debate or a religious defense. I'm sure it happens, but people usually want to jump in because they just can't remain silent. Learn from your patient best friends, the dogs, a tactic that has stood the test of time: stare. That's right: just stare at people. You don't have to say anything. Stare long enough and people will fill in the silent space, even if they've asked you a question. No one knows what you're thinking. Humans project their own stuff onto the silent face, so use that to your advantage. We pupperinos have used the stare for millennia with smashing success. Stifle the need to speak. Not having the vocal apparatus to enter into argumentation or grief or dispute has served us extremely well, and folks end up thinking we are the best listeners on the planet. You may borrow this strategy. Test it. It works.



Live at peace with everyone. Some folks don't want to live at peace with everyone. They have decided everyone is against them, or that they will be against everyone. Some have taken to heart Schulz's other well-known motto: "I love mankind. It's people I can't stand." If you do not wish to live at peace with others, then you must live with the consequences, but if you possess any bit of self-control and want to survive and, perhaps, even enjoy your holiday gatherings, remember: if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. And stare. 🐾