

Aging Isn't for the Humourless

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Fred, the oldest known goldfish, lived to forty one years of age. It's a mystery how he did it. The one thing that all humans have in common with Fred is that we were all born and one day we all will die. But unlike Fred we can have a full and vibrant life maturing if we breathe outside the fish bowl.

Certainly a sense of playful humour seems to be a key ingredient for those seniors who live an energetic and meaningful life. Long gone are the days of toil and struggle to pay the bills, to then retire and soon keel over. Poems like "When I am an Old Woman" and "If I Had My Life to Live Over" abound with wisdom to attend to our maturing years. Take Bill Saviak, co-founder of Teens of Distinction and co-ordinator of Inn from the Cold (a program providing food and shelter for the homeless) at the Centre for Positive Living in Calgary. Bill, when asked how he manages his senior years says, "I don't think of myself as a senior. I am still a kid somehow. I feel joy and amusement in my life." His comments are similar to a Groucho Marx quote. "A man feels as young as the women he feels." Does Bill Saviak continue to contribute, take on causes and hang around youth because he feels young or does he feel young because he maintains activities for which he has passion? The latter is probably the answer. In the November 2000 Mayo Clinic Health Letter, it was reported that those with good relationships and social support lived longer and healthier lives. Volunteerism, sharing skills, travel, taking a course and socializing with others provides vitality.

Margo Lee is a local Calgary elder starlet. She still ice skates, bowls, and dances with her New Zealand Long Poi balls as entertainment at senior nursing homes. Last year at the age of eighty –one she won the Mike in the Stone, Cheers Project award for stand up comic of the year. She offers the following advice: "Do what bubbles up in the moment. Smile! Laughter is the best medicine when you feel down. Never give up trying something new. Don't stay in your comfort zone. Always try something new. Choose your songs carefully. 'Be happy. Don't worry'."

Bill and Margo are physically agile seniors while many others, like my mother, describe their bodies as disintegrating or rusting out. Some of their choices are being minimized through health challenges. Yet an attitude of optimism, good humour and a passion can ease the day. Mom's passion for gardening gives each morning freshness. Everyone needs something to draw them forward into the gift of the day. Gardening keeps Mom feeling lively. After rising to the edge of her bed, she strategically places pads between each of her bony toes and under the arches of her fallen feet, wraps a tensor bandage around her right leg, wiggles into her girdle, pulls on her wrist supports, straps on her magnetic back brace, puts on the rest of her clothes, places inserts into her shoes, washes her face and pops in her teeth. She finishes with a smear of fuchsia lipstick, a pair of hoeing appropriate ear rings, protective sunglasses and a practical but cheerfully decorated, with fake flowers, sunhat. Regardless that much of the day has been invested into this preparation to protect her deteriorating bones and body parts, the finale is a big smile as off to the garden she goes.

Her garden has a ceramic bunny village nestled under one bush while a yo-yo hangs from another. When asked about one particular species in her garden, she says it is called “stolen.” She secretly broke a piece of it off at the local park, put it in water and it sprouted for her. A fake hand peeks out from the bottom of her front porch. She declares. “I can leave my doors unlocked and I have never been robbed. Would-be intruders think the ax murderer lives here.” Yet, one summer, Mom reported to her neighbours that she had experienced an incident of sexual harassment right in her own back garden. While kneeling down to clean her ornamental pond a frog jumped. “He was less than an inch from landing plop into my bra,” she reported.

Although many seniors fuss over a failing memory, others tell humorous stories. “I have a beautiful, young wife and I’m grief stricken because I don’t know where I left her.” Mom sat one evening with an uncomfortable feeling that she was supposed to be somewhere else other than at home. The next morning her friend Peggy called saying that she had invited company for dinner but the guest did not arrive. She was more embarrassed that she couldn’t remember whom she had invited. “Was that me?” Mom asked. Neither remembers, so they laugh. One day my aunt stepped out of the shower to answer the phone. When she returned to the shower she had forgotten how far down she had cleaned. So she started all over again. Now she has a sharpie marker ready to mark the spot. While memories can weaken, an inquiring and firm mind can strengthen. My mother questions what is happening in the world and has belonged to a book club for years. She has never had clearer opinions. Here is an example. “What’s this talk by President Bush of war with Iraq? He needs to be given some estrogen (female hormone) to settle down his top dog aggressive talk.”

Many successful seniors have learned that, though we may not have control over the aging process of body and memory, our attitude can soften the condition. Needless worry is fruitless. So is trying to control other people’s lives. Some seniors discover that sinking their teeth into a steak means they stay there. But real staying power comes from a light hearted approach to life. As my seventy-something neighbour and friend Izora says, “Aging isn’t for sissies or the humourless.” As the years pass we can consciously choose to embrace social activities, maintain an inquiring mind and keep up our passions – silly or serious. One day we will have our own brand of senior smile.

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