

## ***Going Over the Hill: The Joys of Aging***

By Ryan Harrison, MA

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It's something we all do, from the day we're born until the day we "move on": grow older. Each year seems to pass more quickly than the one before, children and grandchildren sprout, grow and flourish, and reflexes slow, promoting an entirely different lifestyle. In a culture that reveres the speed, look and energy of youthfulness, you might be tempted to utter those oft-spoken words: "I never want to get old." To my knowledge, however, such incantations haven't proven very effective. Perhaps it's simply time we took a good – and kind – look at the subject of aging.

Something that we should consider, even though powerful forces compel us not to, is that aging is actually quite natural. There's nothing "wrong" with it, and, in fact, it has its advantages. Could it even be...(prepare yourself)...*good for you*? Of course, this kind of thinking is something that many companies would like you to overlook in favor of wrinkle-free skin, a younger appearance from hair to toenails, and supplements that supposedly help turn back the clock.

Still, it's fairly obvious that no one can actually stop the progression from babbling babe to senior citizen...at least, not yet. Rather than fighting against the normal aging process (a term widely known in health-related circles as "anti-aging"), shouldn't we support a wholesome approach that encourages grace, promotes peace, and stalls or minimizes the onset of preventable diseases? Termed "healthy aging" by alternative and complementary health advocates, this embodies an attitude of both grace and grit: You're going to grow older; why not go with the flow and make the ride more enjoyable?

Some things in life are earned, and many of the greatest joys of aging are of this ilk. Take insight and wisdom as an excellent example. "Old and wise" is a term that many of us have grown up hearing rightfully attributed to the elders in our communities. Certainly, deeper insight comes to those who have lived long enough to develop it. It seems that the longer a person lives, the farther she can see – at least metaphorically.

My own grandparents, raised on farmsteads in America's "wild west" have seen horse-drawn carts evolve into hybrid vehicles and wood-burning stoves into microwave ovens. From telephones to cell phones and marketplace gossip to today's world-wide blogosphere, the "Old and Wise" of our day have witnessed incredible changes in technology, lifestyle, and national and global culture. No doubt, they are less and less surprised with the advancement of our technological world and its societies.

How profound it is, then, that those who have lived the longest among us and have seen the most change tend to have their focus much more close to home. Perhaps one of the most profound insights the elders of our lives can give us is the importance of family.

In general, getting older tends to also mean developing an ever-widening connection of families. Parents beget and raise children who typically do the same. Even in our post-modern age with the increased number of single parents and same-gender life partnerships, children are born, raised and introduced to a world that eagerly awaits them. While it's no mystery that many of them return with spouses, children and grandchildren, it tends to be a very special part of aging to participate in and support the young lives that will shape the future.

Along the same lines, growing older allows for the deepening of other relationships. Life-long friends are truly and increasingly valued with each passing year, for they weather similar storms, offer support and encouragement, and tend to share similar ideals through decades of change. They are memory keepers, those people who were there when wars started and ended, great inventions came into being, and nations underwent political metamorphoses. Elderly friends are like a kind of "Encyclopedia of Life," and as the world spins onward, there is comfort in being with others that remember how things once were and have inexorably changed.

Of course, friendships that last give other sorts of pleasure, as well. From quiet card games shared at home to travels abroad to foreign landscapes, true friendship offers companionship, camaraderie, and a kind of looking-glass through which a person can truly see himself in relation to others.

And then there are the stories! One of the best parts of growing older is the collection of stories that you have to tell – stories about yourself, about friends, about life in general. Never underestimate the power of a story well-told. As a young child, sitting in my grandfather's humble home, listening to him tell stories from his life was not only fascinating, but fun. His stories were from a world I could and will never know: the past. They featured log cabins and one-room schoolhouses. They told of growing up in a world without television, cars, and computers. Such stories educate, inform, and pass along cultural tradition and family history.

In our technologically advanced societies, the practice of story telling is very nearly a long-lost art. Television and cinema have replaced fireside conversations and the weavings of story and song. In truth, I think that today's "Old and Wise" ones may be the last bearers of this dwindling flame of tradition. We should glean what light and genuine enjoyment we can from it before the culture fades out completely.

Perhaps one of the most over-looked joys of aging is the opportunity to slow down and relax. There's a general understanding that the senior members of our societies have put in their time, worked their fair share, and should now be resting, enjoying their "golden years" and the slower pace that they afford. In stark contrast to the neon-laced, hyper-speed, digital world that the rest of our culture supports, retirement can be unhurried, without deadlines and due dates. It can be a time for introspection, devotion to a fulfilling hobby or art form, a time of rest and relaxation. Those who have prepared well for their later years may even find themselves traveling abroad, fulfilling their list of dreams, or spending time deepening relationships with those who matter most to them.

While some may have no choice but to slow down – aging does, after all, take its toll on the body – many find the slower pace enjoyable, or even preferable to the lifestyle of the young and the

restless. Instead of a list of twenty things to accomplish in a day, our elders may only have a few. The rest of the time, then, can be spent reading, napping, engaging with others, cooking, engaging in light sports and exercise, or in many other different ways.

Finally, some thought should be given to a spiritual aspect of aging that may often be overlooked. Typically, the closer one gets to the end of this life, the harder it becomes to care for oneself. Reaching the point of dependence on family, friends and health professionals grants another soul-deepening – though often undesired – experience: the opportunity to receive care from others. There is much to be said for being on the receiving end of such a situation. It can be humbling, touching, and can draw relationships together even closer. If for no other reason at all, receiving others' care is important because it gives them the opportunity to give it.

I firmly believe that some things in life take longer to truly enjoy. From what I can tell, life itself is one of them. How wonderful then, that we get to move through it with increasing awareness, care and concern for others, and then slow down near the end to savor the last stretch of those golden, twilight years.