

What Does it Mean to Age Well

Each morning, when I look into the mirror to shave and brush my teeth, the little boy in me wonders “who is that old fart looking back?”. My inner-self, who resides in my body, is a young man of between 22 and 27. He has lots of energy and enthusiasm. The actual physical body that this “young man” inhabits, will be fifty-eight years old this year. That’s not really old age (I won’t get there until I am 60, in two years), but it is certainly middle age.

I was born in the summer of 1951 and have lived through some of the most interesting times in world history. I was a baby during the Korean Conflict; in elementary school, when President Kennedy was assassinated; in high school when Martin Luther King was killed; and, in college (partially to avoid the draft) during the Viet Nam War. I lived through most of the “Cold War” and was taught how to “duck and cover” under my school desk, in the event of a nuclear attack.

I came of age in a house, which for many years did not have running water or indoor plumbing. We heated our home with wood and cooked with natural gas. Our telephone was a party line that was shared with one other family. We had one car and one wage-earner (my father), who supported a family of four. We had no credit cards, a mortgage of \$30 per month and budgeted \$20 per week for groceries. By supplementing our food purchases with vegetables from the garden and protein from the land around us (deer, squirrels, rabbits, quail, raccoons and fish) we ate very well. Television was three channels in black and white. Television programming began at around six in the morning and ended, with the Star Spangled Banner, just after mid night.

While I was in college, pocket calculators were invented and mass-produced. Each one cost about \$100. Before that, we used a slide-rule and paper and pencil for large calculations. Term papers were written out in longhand and typed on typewriters.

I have grown old enough to experience the advent of computers, the Internet, cell phones, blackberries, text messaging and I pods. Just think about that. I made it through college without email, voice mail, call waiting, or face book! It was a much simpler time, but today is a much more exciting time! I can hardly wait for the first tele-porter – here to Hawaii in .9 seconds, with no jet lag. Beam me up, Scotty!!!

For me the key to aging well was the same as the key for getting out of poverty – secure a good education and develop a passion for life-long learning. Ten years after graduating from Morgan State College (it was not yet a university), I received a Masters Degree in Human Resources from University College, University of Maryland. Six years ago I began working toward a degree in music at McDaniel College.

So here’s my advice to younger people of strategies for aging well:

- Never stop learning – always read something new (newspapers, novels, poetry, history, etc.) and always pay attention to what’s going on around you.
- Hang out with smart, bright people. I surround myself with people that are smarter than me, and then run as fast as I can to try to keep up with them.
- Try to stay out of debt as much as you can. When you have to get a loan, pay it off as quickly as possible, including your home. Never spend out more than you take in, over time.
- Save 5% of what you make. This has to be a rule that you start now! Otherwise, you will never be able to stop working. You have to set something aside if you plan to retire.

- Figure out what you truly love to do and make it your occupation. If you can get paid to do something that you would do anyway, it's like getting paid to play.

I once read an article that indicated one strategy to stave off Alzheimer's disease was to learn to sing or play new songs. Well, I happen to be a music major and I learn new songs every semester. I really don't know whether that helps, cause sometimes I still wonder whether I'm slowly losing my mind, especially when I walk downstairs to get something and then can't remember why I came down there. Maybe that's just what happens to "old farts" as they age.

Anyway, when I was little I wanted to live to be 100 years old. With all that I have seen and learned in the past 58 years, I can't imagine the excitement in store during the next 42! Sure, there are aches, pains and frustrations associated with getting old, but if you always continue to learn and to be awed by the beauty around you – well, how amazing is that? And, just think of the alternative to growing aging, well?...