

Dynamic Aging

By Ethel Lowen

As we grow older, we become more aware of what is most important in life: To be genuinely interested in the concerns of our fellows, the very same concerns of our own; to be free of pain, to be physically and economically independent. We must be alert and aware of the struggles of men and women denied basic breath, denied their human rights and their dignity, while struggling almost to death against predatory and evil men who labor to destroy the fundamental aspirations.

Energy and ingenuity take up the days of one's life to achieve and insure the basic needs of self and family. Surely, one is entitled to a measure of happiness during this prodigious life's effort. I feel that a recognition of one's worth gives satisfaction, but one's worth is measured differently at different points in our lives. It is something that we measure through the eyes of the people in our lives. Whether village or town, it is this connectedness to each other, in individual or community involvement, where long term contentment emerges. We can cultivate this contentment over time if we accept that with each stage of life we access different parts of our selves; we become different people. We understand our role in the community differently; as a child, a young woman, a mother, a grandmother, a member of the community, a professional, a student or a mentor.

If we isolate ourselves, it becomes difficult to relate to the world, to test ourselves or learn from new experiences. Happiness should emerge from within, but happiness grows without. Happiness is a practice. It is something you build with other people. Even those who renounce the world's attachments, and choose a monastic experience understand the value of learning and working alongside of others. This is because compassion for others makes it possible to also have compassion for ourselves. When we participate in the different rites of passage that mark a life-time, we become tuned into the things that make all of us human. In the quest for inner peace one must work on cultivating an awareness of the universals that connect us; the suffering which touches all lives and the strength which makes it possible to find beauty in life.

It is important to be aware that you are a one of the human race. We should not hold others to higher or lower standards than ourselves. We are all dealt different cards in this life but we are all going to leave this earthly home, one day; the richest, the most talented, the most devoted to family, the meanest, the cruelest, the most generous, the haters and lovers. All of us are nonetheless connected. This awareness should allow a kind of gentle feeling toward our species, as we know that we all share this reality. None of the accumulated toys accompany our departure. What remains to sustain and inspire us in our twilight years are the memories of the efforts of those who loved and cared for us.

For this reason, it is important to remember, during early stages in our lives, when we are young parents that our children learn from our example. They learn how to love their own children based on our example to them as parents. And, when young children have the

opportunity to grow up interacting with their grandparents or elders in the community, it helps them understand that aging and dying are not things to be afraid of. It is important for them to learn these things by example. Fear is something we teach our children. They are not born with it. If they witness the joy and peace of older age, they can enjoy their early stages of life in peace as well. There is always something new to look forward to with confidence. When my granddaughter was a little girl, I came to visit her, and she had just learned about death and dying. She looked up at me and said “grandma, you’re going to die!” I remember that I laughed out loud when she told me this and told her “yes, I am.” The important part of this experience, for me, was that I did not lie to her. But, at the same time, it did not turn into a disturbing or scary issue. Yes. We laughed. We will all die one day. But today we are alive, and what happens today is what is important. Did we laugh at least once today? That is more important than whether or not we will die tomorrow.

Besides cultivating a joyful outlook on life, one must also be realistic about what the material body requires. In the golden years, if one is sick and poor or abandoned by children and family, this is usually because we did not make the most of our earlier stages of life. When one is young, income is being generated, there are less health issues, and there is more energy to begin and renew important relationships. If we do not take advantage of these opportunities, we will definitely suffer later on in life when funds, health, and energy are not at their peak. You are responsible for maintaining your own good health. Remember to take your vitamins, to get your regular medical check-ups. Doctors are also human. They make mistakes and a greater knowledge about your own medical history can make a huge difference in enjoying good health. You need to recognize when you need to ask for help, and do it. Financial savings and careful investments in health insurance and so on, are fundamental to giving oneself the space to pursue spiritual, intellectual and social pursuits after retirement.

In addition to financial investments, we should also invest time in learning how to be a good guide to our children. Our experiences often can be of value in teaching them how to avoid mistakes, but sometimes their life paths are very different. We must learn how to guide without being forceful. Sometimes we do not have the answer they are looking for. But even if we cannot relate to their different life style choices, they still require our acceptance and unconditional love. The effort to listen requires only the skill of patience and remaining non-judgmental. Only when you are asked should you provide suggestions. Challenges should be for constructive, positive and creative thinking, always emphasizing an appreciation for the gift of life. In this way it becomes possible to stay connected to your children, no matter what surprises life throws your way. They will always trust in the foundation of your relationship, and will enjoy spending time with you throughout their different experiences. Whether in home care, attendant care, residential placement, the dynamics of aging is changing, and the pace and pressure of sustaining an independent life for our children is overwhelming. A loving and appreciated child, however, can be expected to make more than a telephone call.

What will be child-parent relationships in the next generation"? Will it be what it has been? The variable factor is to be found in the degree of genuine connectedness of

parents and children today. This means beyond the providing of food and shelter, or even the sacrifices of providing education. This requires an establishment of trust, respect, shared adventures, openness of discussion, and intellectual and cultural exposure.

As a young child I remember having a "built-in" sensitivity and awareness of my mother. She left her country Lithuania in 1913 to join my father in America, in New Jersey, to start life in this new "promised land". Somehow, I felt her loneliness. She sang when she felt most profoundly her isolation and loneliness, just as the poet Maya Angelou wrote "I know why the Caged Bird Sings." I could imagine her trauma and pain, saying farewell to her mother at the dock in Antwerp, knowing she would never again see her beloved parents and siblings again. This awareness brought us close in reciprocal love, shared joys and friendship, mutual respect and trust.

Because I was aware of my mother's quiet trauma of her displacement, I keenly identify with the disorientation, and suffering of those women, men, and children forced to flee their country and adjust to survival under desperate conditions. In the 1930s immigrants were becoming acquainted with their American born children. Those with enlightened backgrounds took an active part in the growth and development of their school-going children, encouraging education, free exchange of ideas, and a desire for questioning apparent prevailing injustices. I was lucky. In those times, many parents encouraged their children to seek employment to help parents, and not to entertain ideas for education or self development. Enormous respect for parents was assumed and grave disappointment resulted should this be absent in small or subtle ways.

My mother told me that when she was a girl, in her home in Lithuania, the children were trained to address their parents in the third person, such as "would mother (would she) like to do this or that" and not to directly address the parents, as "would you like to have, or have me do" anything. Already, in such a short time, such family relationships have changed. It was assumed that the family would remain closely involved, sharing responsibility for parents. Ideas of displacing parents to the care of others did not enter the imagination, much less being separated from them for any other reason. But ten years later, the largest human "displacement" of my mother's parents and her siblings occurred in the cruelest "relocation" in human history: to the gas chambers of Auschwitz, Buchenwald and the other prepared extermination centers in Germany, Poland, and Lithuania.

Sixty years on, not a remnant of my family remains in Lithuania. My own parents lived together in their small house in a small town in western Pennsylvania and passed on, long before any decision regarding their care in their old age became a consideration. Now I am 91 years of age, and I attribute the person I have become to the efforts of my parents, whose sacrifices enabled me to prepare myself for life in the 21st century. I travel between India and across different parts of America to be with each of my three children, my grandchildren and my great-grandchildren. They are happy for my visits, during which time I am cared for most lovingly, even indulged in.

Family is unquestionably an important part of understanding aging, but one should not underestimate the importance of extending oneself into the community and continuing to make new friends. After a certain age, people often settle into a routine with a specific group of people. They resist making new acquaintances and this can mean that as life separates people, they can ultimately become very lonely and isolated. It can be a surprise to some of my friends that at 91 years of age, I still travel the world, and that I lead such an intensive life socially. The reason for this is that I am always looking forward to meeting the people who are waiting to meet me at the end of the long journey. My bags are packed with gifts for all my friends and I have a million stories to tell each of them. It is the relationships I look forward to which gives me the energy to live life to the fullest.

An additional challenge for me has been the excitement of interacting with others far removed from my own immediate surrounding. The Internet provides opportunities for finding answers, and information in areas of literature, environment, health, entertainment, government, news in foreign countries, and pen pals if one is so inclined...Happiness is shared in maintaining a wide circle of friends, locally and abroad via the wonder of e-mail. I start each day by checking up on family and friends, all over the world. E-mail is great way to eliminate long, boring phone conversations. I encourage those who are not so tech savvy to enquire about the easier, more user-friendly options for those of us who did not grow up accustomed to the internet.

For older citizens here, we have an inexpensive (\$100 approx.) web.tv. Microsoft Network), which uses one's own television as the screen, and one keeps the keyboard, unwired), handy on one's lap, even while laying back on one's own bed pillows! It can be a wonderful tool for staying connected to people, and for the physically disabled who cannot step out of the house often, it can provide an access to the outer world which can be liberating. You can surf the internet and look at pictures of the Milky Way, of our tiny green planet floating in space, and you can zoom in on satellite cameras and look at your own neighborhood from up above.

My way has been awareness of the connectedness of the human race, shared understanding of the joy and brevity of our trip on the planet. I have followed this mantra: to not harm anymore, to not harm the planet, to not allow oneself to be harmed. The sentient state of awareness I first learned in New Delhi, at IIC (the Indian International Centre), during a lecture in the garden by Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk. His simple lesson involved a huge basket of oranges brought in and distributed to the men and women in the group. The questioning began: How did these oranges get here? Who planted their seeds? Who watered them? Who plucked them? How did they get to the city? Which hands passed them on and on till it reached our hands? How many journeys has this orange taken before it was peeled and eaten? How does a tiny seed grow and eventually fuse with our bodies and our histories?

Throughout our lives we will eat many oranges. As a child we may experience the delight of the newness of its taste. We may not understand how it became an orange but we can enjoy it. As we grow into maturity, we can lose this awe and delight if we are not mindful of what we are doing. We must bring that orange back into focus again. And how do we

shut out all of the noise of our daily lives while eating this orange? We hold it in our hands, and remember its history; focus on what connects us to the human experience of growing and eating oranges. We use this simple act of peeling and tasting a sweet slice of an orange, as a way of remembering that we are human. Like this orange, we are a part of a life cycle, and we pass through many hands and hearts to become who we are. And if we can do this with a simple orange, perhaps we can learn to do this in other areas of our lives, increasing the joy and peace obtained by the simple acts in life. And if we do this often enough, then the very last orange we eat in this life, will be the very sweetest, ripest, and will fill us with the greatest contentment as we pass pieces of it to the child sitting beside us, taking a first bite of life.