

Joining the club

• BATYA L. LUDMAN

There it was, simply arriving in the mail without my asking for it. That tiny card that said I've joined the club – a senior citizen. I wasn't expecting it, since my husband, two years older than me, is not yet considered a senior.

Perhaps I should be thrilled that at long last, with my teenage years a distant memory, I'm being "carded" because they doubt my age and want proof. While maybe not looking, acting or quite feeling my age, like a tree, with each year new lines develop, and I'm noticing that some things that were once easy are now more difficult. I turn the radio off when I back up the car. Who needs the distraction at this stage? Physically, much of the agility I once proudly sported has started to be replaced with stiffness. As for memory, let's not go there!

While inevitable, aging may not always be fair or fun. When I complain, not too infrequently, to my husband because I also have one of those little-known genetic joint problems that comes with lots of other "body falling apart" stuff, he's the first to point a finger at my body's wearing out. Given that the clock is ticking, seemingly much faster than it once did, I'm desperate to make sure that I live my life to the fullest while coping with the aging process as best as possible.

I sadly remember how our phone conversations to my father-in-law changed as he began to decline physically. Once full of enthusiasm and stories, simple questions such as "What's new?" and "How are you feeling?" began to elicit an emotional response, coupled with a sense of resignation and resentment, suggesting that he recognized with his super sharp mind, that his body was not so slowly "failing" him. Impossible for him to focus on what he could do, he could only see what he now could no longer do. Those experiencing this fully understand just how difficult it can be – yearning for or mourning the loss of the blissful naiveté of youth when bodies both looked and performed the way we thought they should without having to give it a second thought. So before you and a friend get together for an "organ recital" of aches and pains, here are a few suggestions for trying to make age 60 plus, not necessarily the new 40, but rather great in its own right. As always, I welcome your suggestions for success.

1. Aging can be difficult on many levels, yet some people are simply blessed with good bones, great genes and a youthful demeanor, which definitely helps. And yes, if you have your health, you really do have everything. That said, how you actually feel is as much in your mind as in your body. There are old souls at 30 and young folks at 90. Much is determined by your attitude and how you approach the world. If you take things as they come and see yourself as an active participant in your journey, you're far more likely to have a positive outlook. If by nature you see the world as dumping on you, allowing you little control over your life, the glass



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half empty, and see doom and gloom around every corner, you're more likely to feel "done to" – not in control and defeated by challenges both big and small. Challenges are inevitable. How you choose to respond to them is up to you. If you find it difficult to take things as they come, perhaps now is the time to seek outside support to help you cope and move into a state of acceptance as you move into the next stage of your life.

2. Age provides perspective. Life is short, perfection is a myth, most mistakes are repairable, and

for those that aren't, you learn to let things go. Having the opportunity to have "been there and done that" enables you to now differentiate and appreciate what's truly important in life from that which you just thought was important. Your values change and become clearer with time and life experience. No longer needing to prove yourself in order to get ahead, you can fully treasure all that you have in this moment, doing what you'd like to do with whom you'd like and when you'd like. Be it the grandkids, travel or taking a course, this is now your time.

3. Recognizing that you leave the world with no material possessions, age allows you to better appreciate that your sense of worth may come from giving to others. Real happiness and meaning may lie in day-to-day social contact with others. Volunteering your time and expertise are gifts you may now choose to give freely. Relationships with those you care about assume greater importance, and everything else, the "stuff" that has come into your life and occupied your time, you hopefully have learned to let go.

4. Aging invites you to take a look at both who you are on the inside and how you portray yourself to the outside world. Your posture, gait, hair color, wrinkles, smile, activity level, interests and more reflect a piece of who you are and how you choose to be seen. It's not about your appearance or attractiveness, it is about how you present yourself. In what way does how you are seen by others reflect how you experience your age? Do you feel and act your age and enjoy how you present yourself in spite of the aging process? Do you see yourself as young and vivacious, upright and strong, or drooping and tired? Are you okay with how you look, does it impact on how you feel and are there changes you'd like to make? How do you personally define "aging" and what does "old" mean for you?

5. Take note of where you are spiritually. How do you look at the world, given the wisdom you've acquired and through the perspective of time? Do you feel a sense of calm, accomplishment and pride in who you have become, while acknowledging that you are even now a work in progress and continue to evolve? What things are on your list that you'd like to accomplish and what is your game plan?

Aging is a process that entails both positive and negative. Loss, whether from poor health, financial instability, change in status, retirement, the loss of a life partner, or the increased feeling of aloneness, may at times overshadow the positives. I hope to begin to address these in future columns. ■

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