GROWING OLDER

It is likely that most people age fifty or less seldom think about getting older, unless they are exposed on a regular basis to an aging or infirmed family member, neighbor, or coworker. They think that inevitable process won't ever happen to them -- until, of course, it does! A visit to any retirement community, nursing home or assisted-living facility will be a real 'eye-opener,' however. You will see the wide range of effects of getting older -- from the 'not very bad' to the shocking and awful. Because modern American culture tends to shuffle older people away out of the limelight -- and because most families cannot abide having the 'burden' of grandma and grandpa still living under their roof, as it was commonly done in the past -- aging in our country can reveal much loneliness, depression, and despair for the elderly.

Thankfully, aging occurs very slowly. It does not have be fearful, once it is fully realized and understood. Your thoughts, attitudes, physical desires, emotions, and moral values will all remain unchanged from your youth. And although your long-term memories will always be with you as you grow older -- unless you acquire a tragic neurological condition, such as dementia -- only your short-term memory will be affected. (For example, I need to make a grocery list when going shopping, or I get distracted and forget to buy some items!) It is the rest of your physical body, though, that will undergo unexpected changes.

Your metabolism will slow down. Various new aches and pains will come and go. Your hair will turn gray, then white, then get thin, and finally often fall out, especially in men. You might struggle with weight gain, or become pre-diabetic when your pancreas becomes too sluggish in providing the necessary about of insulin to process your blood sugar. Cuts and bruises will take longer to heal. Skin will wrinkle and sag, and you get 'age spots.' Vision and hearing are lessened. Teeth and gums are affected. Taste buds and smells weaken. Muscles and bone mass both shrink. One's body temperature may be either too hot or too cold under various conditions. Your usual eight-hour sleep cycle becomes disrupted. You might feel weak or tired and need a short afternoon nap. You will need to drink more water, and add more fiber to your diet, to help thwart constipation. Your bladder may also leak on its own, or cause one to visit the toilet a few times during the night. The prostate gland in men will become problematic.

Science tells us that about 25% of our longevity is based on inherited parental genetics, with the rest being dependent upon lifestyle choices, one's living environment, and one's unique good luck -- such as not suffering a war, a natural disaster, or an unexpected accident.

I would now like to outline my personal story of aging. In five months, I will turn seventy-two years old. I would say that my journey into 'Senior Land' has fortunately not been too traumatic thus far. So I will next share with you my learned advice and experiences; perhaps it will help my curious younger readers not to worry too much about their inevitable upcoming years.

For one thing, time itself seems to speed up when you are old. This illusion ironically comes at a point when the typical Senior realizes that there are now less years ahead than have already passed. When I was younger, I assumed that I would happily live to perhaps age ninety, with no serious disabilities, then die peacefully and pain-free in my sleep one day. But now I see obituaries of people I went to school with who are my age, or famous celebrities my age who have likewise passed away from this or that disease. Suddenly, I wonder if I will be lucky enough to merely make it to eighty!

I have also experienced a new rebirth of my appreciation of nature and the natural world. The planet we live on -- and our responsibility to treasure and protect it for future generations -- is a truly amazing place! The remarkable variety of plants and animals, the vast oceans, the power of weather, the Earth's diverse landforms, and the beautiful changing seasons are endlessly fascinating to me even more now.

Having spent a lifetime eagerly studying world religions and faith, I assumed that in my old age I would have figured out everything. But the opposite is true: I frankly am not sure what happens to us after we die -- Will there be a heaven or hell? Will there be a divine judgment before God? Will I return again to our world as a reincarnated person? Will my soul survive after I die? I just don't know. It's very baffling! My core belief of the existence of a loving and Almighty Creator, however, is unchanged.

I do find that I am much less concerned about my pride and my ego now than when I was younger. I believe, instead, that I have become more compassionate, more forgiving, and more patient with others. Kindness has become my foremost focus. I try to listen more and talk less in most circumstances. Giving is better than receiving, I have learned. Helping and being of service to others is a basic key to one's own fulfillment and happiness.

When you understand that you will not live forever, the uselessness of war, murders, and urban violence also becomes starkly apparent. As a young man, I thrilled to movies that showed explosive battles and fighting. But now that same bloodshed seems repulsive and absurd, so I watch far fewer of those kinds of films now. Seeing young soldiers dying, or being crippled for life, or being cursed with lingering PTSD seems a horrifying waste to me, when all life is so very precious -- even sacred.

I counsel other Seniors to keep working as long as they are able, providing they still have good health and enjoy what they are doing. You have to have a reason to get out of bed each morning! Saying you will retire and simply play golf every day will last as a routine for perhaps six months, but then you will get really bored. You'll also discover that you just can't sit around and do nothing -- you'll go crazy! I still work part-time as a reference librarian at my local public libraries (after formerly being a teacher for thirty years), and my job remains quite involved and rewarding. The social interaction with both the public and my coworkers remains fun and stimulating, with lots of variety! I also volunteer at seven different community venues -- as an individual English language tutor (with two separate students); as a historic tour guide at California's State Capitol; at the information desk at Sacramento International Airport; as an Amtrak station host; at the Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts theater as an usher; and as an English Conversation Group facilitator for foreign university students.

Continually challenging your mind with new learning opportunities is crucial to a successful and vibrant old age. Be creative, start a new hobby, take a free college class, learn a musical instrument, take up painting or other arts & crafts, join a book club, research your family tree, travel -- now you finally have the time to do anything you want, without being largely consumed with building your career, raising your family, etc. Two of my passions are international travel (114 countries so far) and writing short stories in all genres (150 so far, with 15 self-published book collections now up on Amazon.com).

As you get older, you will find yourself loading up on over-the counter medicines from your local pharmacy, in an on-going attempt to combat new aches and pains, or coughs and colds. But most of those products are less than helpful, because their potency, for general safety reasons, is so low. Hence, you should get an actual doctor's prescription for real relief. Speaking of doctors, your family physician will become a trusted good friend! You will probably first check out on the internet whether your worrying new malady is serious, e.g. is my headache the onset of a stroke? -- but most likely it is not. (My doctor told me that about two-thirds of typical office visit concerns reveal nothing wrong.) You will also spend time talking with other Seniors about their latest medical problems, and/or share advice about possible surgeries, or potential joint replacements, or the efficacy and side effects of specific prescription drugs, etc. In my life, I have had X-rays, an ultrasound, a CAT scan, and an MRI -- so I can attest that our modern medical technology is amazing! I am also fortunate in having to take only one daily medication at this point in my life -- a very low dose beta-blocker.

Get an annual blood test to check your glucose levels, your cholesterol, your red & white blood cell count, and so forth. Regularly check your blood pressure. Do an annual at-home fecal stool test to screen for colon cancer. Have an eye exam every two years. Visit your dentist twice a year. Brush and floss your teeth every day. Check your skin for any unusual growths. Take a daily multi-vitamin if you want. Skip any tobacco and caffeine. Limit your consumption of alcohol. Be extra careful when climbing ladders, going up on your roof, or getting in and out of the bathtub -- you don't want to slip and fall and possibly break a bone. Most accidents happen around the home! Be extra careful using power tools and similar yard and garage equipment. Have a daily exercise routine. I walk an hour a day and bicycle an hour a day, as does my wife (who is seven years my junior). I additionally do twenty minutes of resistance band stretches and ten-pound hand weight exercises every morning. I also attend two one-hour Senior group exercise classes every week. It is very fun! Maintaining your health as much as possible for as long as possible is very important as you grow older.

Driving your car gradually changes. Parallel parking becomes more of a challenge, as does backing in and out of tight parking places, such as at a busy shopping mall. Take your time and be careful! (Most newer cars have backup cameras nowadays, which is very useful.) I will often park further away in whatever parking lot I use to avoid any possible problems. There may come a time, however, when you cannot safely drive a car anymore: your slowing reaction time, poor night vision, or impaired physical coordination may make it impossible. It will be a shocking day (the startling loss of independence and freedom!), but you have to submit to the reality of the situation when it dawns, both for your safety and the safety of others. So please, Grandpa or Grandma, give up the keys when the time comes, before an accident happens!

Family and friends take on a new importance as you age. Keep your long-time friends and treasure them! (A special 'shout out' to Joe Masonick and Rick McKay, whose remarkable friendships I have enjoyed for more than fifty-four years!) They have accompanied you on most of your life's journey, and they know you well. If you are happily married, your spouse (Alice and I have been married for forty years, and counting!) will also become your loyal and trusted friend and companion. You will lovingly support and help each other until the end. Your children and grandchildren should also be a true source of delight as you watch them mature and grow.

If you were wise and managed your finances well, old age will find you with more than ample resources. Money will regularly flow in -- in the form of investment dividends, a monthly pension or retirement annuity, accrued interest on savings and checking accounts, Social Security benefits, etc. I find that my wife and I have more money now than ever before, compared to when we were young and quite poor! This bonus can be explained because most people by age 60+ own their homes (hence, no more mortgage payments), own their cars, pay off their credit cards and other bills immediately in full, and have all the furniture, electronics, home appliances, and clothing they will ever need. As a result, much less money is being expended, while that surplus cash keeps coming in, nonstop. Hopefully, your income tax bracket is lower too as a Senior, as are your monthly medical insurance premiums. So, after setting up your children's inheritances, the rest of your assets can be spent on fun Senior activities such as travel, or be willed to churches and other organizations, or given to worthy charities. A final word of advice on inheritances: please clean out and jettison the bulk of your lifetime's accumulation of memorabilia, files, unused clothing, and so on while you are still alive. Your children will not want or need 95% of such things, so simply dump it and save them the hassle. Keep mostly photos and letters, however, for those items will be very useful for remembering important family history.

For my entire life, I have wanted to learn and know everything that I could. I was interested in almost every topic. I felt that by the time I got old, I would have figured out the very riddle of existence. I wanted wisdom, realization, and spiritual enlightenment above such fleeting temptations as fame and fortune. Well, happily, I have had moments of sublime insights, peaceful clarity, and precious snippets of pure bliss. I have felt times of being truly blessed by God -- though not because I particularly deserved it or earned it. But I have learned that life is constantly changing on so many levels that it is impossible to 'figure it all out.' So my advice is to simply 'go with the flow' and be content with what you can control and accomplish.

It is quite pleasant when young people approach me and ask about what life was like in the past. They want to know about important historic events that I lived through, such as the assassination of President Kennedy, the Apollo 11 Moon landing , the 'hippie' days of Flower Power in the late 1960s, or the collapse of Communism in the former Soviet Union. At such times, I feel like a human 'time machine,' taking them back to my recollections! It is also very pleasant talking about 'the good 'ol days' with other Seniors -- we share the same nostalgic memories of our favorite music, classic movies, high school and college experiences, lost loves, and our past in general when we were young. We will also share opinions on which changes in world progress during our lifetimes have been positive, and which have been negative.

When your time comes to leave this earthly plane, hopefully you will be at home, in your own bed, pain-free and surrounded by your loved ones, rather than being in some strange hospital room or nursing home. Both my wife and I have already made out our wills, and have signed legal documents to not be resuscitated should we fall into a medically hopeless coma. We have also formally donated our bodies for medical scientific research -- to be cremated and dispersed afterwards rather than being buried in a cemetery plot. So once we are gone, we are gone. This seems the right way for us.

I have heard that miserable, unhappy people in the productive phases of their lives will have miserable, unhappy, and unhealthy older years until they die. This is true. The bitter, constantly complaining, grouchy, and negative types of elders you will surely encounter. But the opposite is also true: If you had a fruitful career, a fulfilling marriage, and a well-planned life, your Senior years will be quite positive and enjoyable. The correct choice to make is yours, as you move through your life -- from young adulthood to maturity, then on to retirement and finally into old age itself.

Looking back -- even with all of its challenges, setbacks, and mistakes -- I must admit that I have had a wonderful life!

And there is a certain reassurance knowing that -- even when I am gone -- the sun will still shine, and life will go on, as always...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

March 31, 2023