

Getting on the Same Page with...Our Aging Selves

The moment meant more to me than I realized at the time. I was playing doubles tennis with Lloyd and Manny who, besides being great friends, were 75 and 80 years old respectively. They could still hit a hard ball on a good day, and had well-developed court instincts that comes from years of play. They were easy to under-estimate. On that day, their game was on. After Manny had served out some aces, Lloyd smiled at him and said, "Manny, today you are playing like you are 75." It was a compliment and a tease at the same time. They laughed in the way that aging friends can – with a nod to the old age upon them, and a rebuke that time had not taken all.

Because I have recently felt my middle age upon me, that story has reared its head as a beacon for how I should respond to the aging process. Grace and humor need to replace irritability and denial as my mantra. I shouldn't get frustrated when I start my day with newspaper and coffee in hand, only to remember that I need my reading glasses. My coffee often grows cold, as I try to remember where I last placed those roving glasses. Is that another sign of aging I wonder?

There are many examples around me of people who are able to accept the aging process with dignity. In my weekly yoga class I am surrounded by older women who use blocks and bars to extend their stretch and balance. My instructor, as if to reinforce that each person has her own capabilities, tells us, "Keep your eyes on your own mat." Sometimes the group finishes class feeling grateful for what their body has allowed them to do. Other times, it is more of a bonding experience for these septuagenarians where showing up is what counts. In either case, they leave the room smiling, chalking up another "win."

Of course it is not only our bodies that age, but our minds too. One aging sign for me is the slower recall of names. Even in my own family, I will shout out the names of my children, "Sarah-Naomi-Ari", as if it is one long name where the appropriate person responds. Mental math, a source of pride when I was younger, is much harder now as I frequently depend on calculators to give me the answer. I feel better though when I hear

other people's stories. My smart New York-bred sister-in-law offered that she recently was asked, "Who was Ben Affleck's co-star in his first major movie?" and had to leapfrog through the answer by beginning with "Johnny Damon" (a New York Yankee) that got her to "Damon" that finally got her to "Matt." She bemoaned her lack of mental crispness.

What do we do when we seek not only to "maintain", but to expand our capabilities and grow with the times? In my experience, we have to be very careful in selecting the right goals. Two examples illustrate my own selection process: fixing my swim strokes and joining the blogging world. I considered retooling my swim strokes because I was once a reasonably competitive swimmer who has since become the slowest swimmer in my family. New techniques to speed up the stroke were not available when I was a teenager. I shared with my friend Rhonda that I needed to invest time and energy in updating my stroke technique and she asked two simple questions: "Why do you care and what else is on your list of things you want to do?" When vanity and pride were the reasons, and other things on my list included "affording college tuition", I knew that swimming had been eclipsed by more important goals.

However, I have joined the world of bloggers. I want my writing to be more accessible as part of online community of people intrigued by similar ideas. My blog is still in the works as part of my redesigned website to grow my consulting business, but I feel good about the choice. I also occasionally IM (instant message), though I don't use all the hip abbreviations that my children use. Other choices include modernizing my music tastes with some of my children's favorite iPod tunes. I've chosen to flip the bird like the characters in "Friends" which is alternately hip and immature. I am on the fence about making TIVO an active verb in my life, but odds are it will beat fixing my freestyle when I decide to choose.

So, besides picking our growth goals carefully, what else must we do to be at peace with our aging selves? We need humor and good friends -- humor so that we shouldn't take ourselves so seriously and friends to share the experience. That is what

Lloyd offered Manny on the tennis court. Humor is what allows poet Maya Angelou to observe, “Regarding body changes, there are many occurring every day...like my breasts...they seem to be in a race to see which will reach my waist first.”

Friends of course are essential for so many aspects of our life, but remembering us for what we were, and loving us for what we are is one of their most important gifts. When I complained to my Mom, who is both friend and family that I am not running down every tennis ball as I used to, she responded wryly, “Maybe you are just getting smarter.” That was a whole new perspective, as startling to me as to those who first considered that the world may be round.

A friend also came to my rescue was when I was lamenting how hard it was to stay abreast of current authors and that maybe I needed a reading club to invigorate the effort. “Maybe that will help,” my friend advised, “and I will join, but don’t you think you are asking a lot of yourself these days?” Perhaps I am, but that is part of how I intend to grow old. And done with grace too -- appreciating and returning the support, humor, and insight offered about what makes us “us.” The book club, the yoga group, the intergenerational tennis experience, the blog, and maybe even TIVO will be the means to acceptance and growth.