

A Rabbi and a Doctor Discuss the Benefits of Growing Old

By RABBI MARK SCHIFTAN
AND DR. FRANK BOEHM

Mark: Frank, as we once again approach Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, we are made aware yet again of the tenuous nature of each of our existence. In fact, the words of the Hebrew prayerbook ask that we acknowledge this fact of our mortality. Looking at the start of a New Year, the prayerbook offers this starting question for all of us to ponder: Who shall live, and who shall die? While none of us knows the answer to that question, one of the benefits of aging, I believe, is the comfort that comes through having lived a longer life than many have enjoyed in the generations that preceded us. In that sense, at least, getting older is a blessing.

Frank, what are your thoughts about this?

Frank: Mark, now that I am in my mid-eighties, I have become more aware of the fact that while there are certain disadvantages in growing old, such as illness and frailty of both body and mind, there clearly are quite positive aspects to the aging process, the most important of which is that of wisdom that comes with growing older.

There is a saying that good judgement comes from experience and experience comes from bad judgement. As we age, we learn much from the many mistakes we make in our youth and middle age and from this learning we become wiser. I am at a stage in my life where I make few mistakes. I am a wiser person for all that I have experienced over the decades of my life.

The fact that we become wiser as we age is also confirmed by the fact that our brain's frontal lobe, the largest of the five lobes of the brain, does not fully mature until our mid to late twenties. The frontal lobe, among other functions, influences complex thought processes and personality and controls a wide range of higher-level functions that shape our interactions with the world, including judgment, abstract thought, and creativity. The wisdom that comes with aging, therefore, starts at an early age due to physiological maturation, and later in life due to a maturation process influenced by all we experience during our lives.

Mark: Frank, I agree, the greatest gifts of aging are the wisdom accrued by actual experience, the lessons learned after living through decades of life, and the perspective offered by reflecting back on both of those — the crucial wisdom obtained, combined with the valuable lessons learned — that put things in a broader understanding of the meaning of our days and the purpose of our time upon this earth. That accrual of wisdom, life's lessons, and the perspective lens offered by both helps calm us and guide us to an understanding of the rhythm of life, and of each of our lives, in a manner in which, perhaps, we cannot account for nor comprehend in our younger years. In this sense, at least, there is comfort in our aging that eludes us in our youth.

This, I believe, is what the biblical author of Ecclesiastes meant, when he wrote of the rhythm of life, the flow of the seasons, and the passage of the years:

To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under Heaven.
A time to be born, and a time to die,
A time to plant, and a time to uproot what is planted;
A time to tear down, and a time to build up;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh,
A time to grieve and a time to dance;
A time to throw stones (in anger), and a time to gather stones (together once again);
A time to embrace and a time to let go;
A time to seek, and a time to surrender;
A time to keep, and a time to return back once again;
A time to tear (the garment in mourning), and a time to sew it up, once again;
A time to keep silent, and a time to speak (yet again).

These words of Ecclesiastes are often misunderstood, as a type of resignation or malaise. But the writer's intention and purpose was the exact opposite, which only the mature-of-years can understand and appreciate.

Rather than expressing resignation at the inevitable passage of time and of our lifetimes, the author was offering his words as a message of comfort, as an affirmation that with the accrual of years comes the understanding that the universe has an order; that life, indeed, has a rhythm.

And with the benefit of that acquisition of wisdom, we might have a glimpse into our place and our role in that rhythm, that order, that flow. Therefore, we might derive tremendous solace in acknowledging our privilege in reaching this time in our lives.

Frank, as a rabbi, a husband, a father, that accrual of wisdom over the years has helped me frame things with more patience, more insight and more calm perspective in every arena of my life, both personal and professional. It has made me better: more understanding, more empathetic, more forgiving. Has that been a similar experience for you?

Frank: Mark, we totally share that experience. The wisdom that comes with aging is truly a wonderful benefit of growing old. It is my hope that those of us gifted with reaching later years of life will understand that despite the increase in frailty of mind and body, this blessing of wisdom that comes with growing older will be viewed as a uniquely beautiful aspect of the aging process. It is written in our Jewish prayer book that, "Birth is a beginning and death a destination." It is my firm belief that this trip is made sacred and meaningful by the fuel of wisdom. •

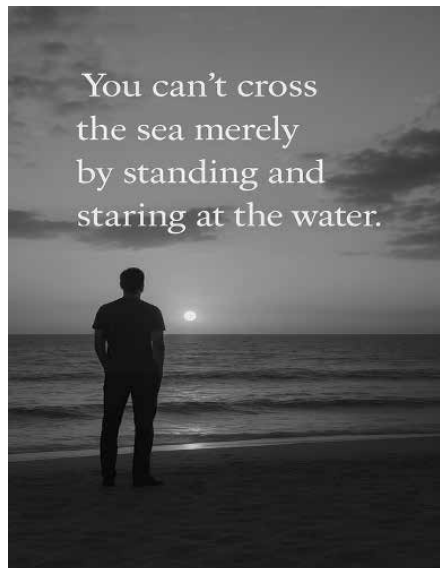
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PLAN YOUR



...so that it's not just a fairy tale.



Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)
Poet-Writer-Composer-Philosopher

Warning: People, if you don't start planning for your Happily Ever After NOW, you might end up adrift in the stormy seas of ..., **PROCRASTINATION!**

By LORETTA SAFF



Be honest, raise your hand if you've ever waited until the last minute to do something. Now, imagine your last-minute attempt at crossing an ocean in a tiny rowboat... while wearing a blindfold!

Then, halfway along you realize you forgot the oars back on the dock! Yes, that's procrastination in action.

When you put off planning your non-financial future, sometimes it can feel like you are in a

Retirement Time Warp

Week 1 – Smooth Sailing

You've turned in your office keycard, hoisted the sails, and the breeze is perfect. You sleep in, brunch at your leisure, and binge your favorite shows. It's all sunshine and calm waters.

Little do you know; *indecision* is just over the horizon.

Week 2 – Choppy Waters:

You straighten closets, organize the garage, and check expiration dates on the spice bottles and cans in the pantry..., but it's only Wednesday.

Suddenly, you realize this "easy breezy not-working-anymore cruise" has sprung a leak. You are bored. You grab the life preserver labeled "Netflix" and cling to it for dear life.

Week 3 – The Fog of "Now What?":

Forty years of dreaming about freedom, and here you are, staring at an endless ocean wondering, "What happened to happily-ever-after?"

That's when the guilt sets in. You begin to realize you could have joined that perfect exercise class, set up volunteer connections, and even learned a new skill. But, no, you had to spend all that time polishing the deck of your procrastination dinghy.

Here's a two-part Life Jacket for you to bring along to avoid wasting valuable time when you do get to shore:

1 - Chart Your Course (Self-Assessment):

Create a log of what you really value, things like adventure, new learning, gratitude and giving back. Use this as a compass to avoid getting lost at sea, or worse, caught in that whirlpool of indecision.

2 - Pack a Curious List:

List 10 things you'd like to try or learn — you won't 'have to' or promise, just list them without any pressure. Keep this list in your captain's log (that's your desk!) and check it often.

That small nudge of curiosity will start your paddling (writing notes) and keep your boat smoothly moving toward your *happily ever after*. Check these out from the Osher Lifelong Learning Course Catalogue:

- How to Write a Memoir (of your crossing?)
- Beginner Ukulele (to play and sing as you sail?)
- Languages of the World (to be ready for the adventures!)

MORAL:

Embark on your 'after full-time work' journey standing at the dock ready to cross the sea.

Grab the oars and start rowing!

The sooner you start, the smoother the sail.

BON VOYAGE,

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