

Ah, a New Year.

We both reminisce with nostalgia of Auld Lang Syne (or Old Times Past) and look forward to the opportunities of a New Year. But it is not all wine and roses. I am reminded of the Tennessee Ernie Ford lyrics: "Another year older and deeper in debt." With the expectation of the possibilities in the New Year comes the realization that there will be another birthday. I am reminded of actress Bette Davis' famous remark: "Getting old is not for sissies."

As with most things, aging can be good and aging can be bad. Perhaps successful aging would be a good subject to meditate upon to start the New Year.

Note that the subject is not just aging but rather SUCCESSFUL AGING. This concept implies a certain personal victory over the inevitability of time. This is a concept that is not aimed at longevity, per se, but rather the quality of life.

I have spent considerable time in my profession dealing with the geriatric population. The experience was almost always gratifying and certainly eye-opening. For example, I found that sex is definitely not limited to the younger population. Let me tell you about an elderly couple from Orange County that came down to see me in consultation for a very interesting problem--- on second thought I think that will be a story for another day.

What my Senior population taught me was what it meant to grow older, who did it well and who did it not so well. Allow me to pass on some thoughts:

First of all, Aging is not all aches, pains, and decreased function. USUALLY as we age there is less anxiety in life, less self-consciousness, more acceptance of others, an increase in wisdom, more financial security, less self-centeredness, decreased possession by possessions, a decrease in the stress of competition and increase in general relaxation and laughter. Phew! That's a lot. These positive gifts of aging are given to us unless we screw them up.

One way not to interfere with the good things that aging can bring is to **keep things simple**. As Fr. Michael Moynahan writes in his book Meditations for Lent:

“Orphaned wisdom, too long lost, buried under tons of less important things. When you are hungry: eat. When you are thirsty: drink. When you are tired: rest. When you are lonely: meet....

“When you are frightened or confused: talk. When you are grieving or disbelieving: tell the story.”

A researcher and psychiatrist by the name of George Vaillant studied, many years ago, a group of well-adjusted sophomores at Harvard University and followed them for the next 70 years. He published his findings in the book Aging Well. (Ironically one of those individuals was a future President of the United States, John F. Kennedy.)

The predictors of healthy aging involved the Usual Suspects: no smoking, no alcohol abuse, positive physical activity, healthy weight. He also emphasized the necessity of warm relationships with others including an intimate relationship in marriage. In fact, he posits that the only things that really matter in one’s life are relationships to other people and, of course, healthy coping mechanisms or how we respond to the trouble that life gives us.

Healthy coping includes adaptation: when it becomes more difficult to see, get new glasses and use brighter lights.

Sublimation: Turn pent up energy into sports; dedicate discomfort for the Greater Glory of God.

Humor: To laugh is often the best medicine.

Altruism: focusing on the needs of others is the best cure for the “it’s all about me” disease.

About fifty years ago there was an article published called “The Normal Jet Pilot.” That article discussed the fact jet pilots in the Air Force scored remarkably “normal” on psychological tests. As such, these pilots tended to focus on the outside rather than the inside of themselves; they coped extraordinarily with the severe stresses of combat. An attempt was made to analyze the background factors of these pilots and it was found that one of the common denominators

was that they were encouraged, while growing up, to develop their spirituality by actively participating in their religion. The specific faith tradition that they were exposed was varied, but they all had a formal religious practice.

In a study of a senior population, churchgoers reported more joy in their lives than did non-churchgoers. And, since I'm in the mood to be quoting publications, Dr. Terrance Hall in the Southern Medical Journal noted that "religious attendance and identity in Seniors resulted in increased cognitive functioning."

Church is good.

Finally, we often pray for Healing in our lives or the lives of others. The keys to the good life are not rules to follow or problems to avoid; but rather an engaged humility in an earnest acceptance of life's pains and promises.

So I asked Brother George, our Council's centenarian, what was the secret to aging well. He responded without hesitation:... "Fast cars and fast women."