

Aging Gracefully: Why Getting Old Is A Lot Like Being Young

I have been thinking about what it means to "age gracefully" and I wonder whose opinion seems to matter. Does the aging person feel "ungraceful"? Or is the person viewing the aging person deciding whether or not the aging person is graceful or not?

By

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I have been thinking about what it means to "age gracefully" and I wonder whose opinion seems to matter. Does the aging person feel "ungraceful"? Or is the person viewing the aging person deciding whether or not the aging person is graceful or not? I decided that it is the viewer who decides. After all, the dancer executing a difficult leap or pas de deux is not concerned with whether or not her movement is graceful; she is concerned with how skillfully she executes the movement.

At 93, I am definitely part of the aging population. I happen to be blessed with clarity of mind, awareness of physical difficulties and a willingness to ask for help. If this be graceful, then so be it. I welcome the use of devices -- walkers, canes, walking sticks -- and I welcome the advice of physical therapists.

We live in a society where independence is highly valued, and when it becomes apparent that independence is a deterrent to safe living, some of us are unwilling to be dependent. I think accepting dependence is not only graceful, it is sensible. Some of my friends have suggested that how we live when young depends on how we live when old. This is a tempting rationale, but not always applicable. I have always lived an active life, as a dancer (both en point and modern), a skier, a backpacker and a swimmer. I can no longer ski, nor dance, nor swim.

How do I deal with these losses? I walk in the pool at the Y, up and down 10 times (one mile), soak in the hot tub and stretch in the shower. I join writing classes and writing groups. After I published my second book in 2010, I decided I wanted to learn how to write plays and took an intensive six-week course at the Berkeley Rep School of Theater. Then I joined Stagebridge and signed up for their playwriting class. In addition to that, I joined a group of play writers who get together once a month and read scenes from their plays, getting feedback from fellow writers.

Not one of the writers in the monthly play writing group is my age. They are all younger and none of them is ever patronizing. One of the worst things I have experienced is a patronizing, overly helpful attitude; sort of like an older person patting me on the head, saying, "there, there, you're doing fine."

There is a similarity between persons in adolescence and persons who are aging. I checked out a list of anxieties expressed by teenagers and those expressed by people of my age or younger by a decade or two. Here are some of the statements and questions that often come from teenagers:

Age of Anxiety: Puberty

- My body doesn't feel familiar any more. My hands and feet feel so big!
- When will I belong? I feel like I'm on the outside looking in.
- I have a sense of being invisible.
- I'll never make it, why try? Do I have to go to school?
- I feel like I'm drowning.
- Are things going to get better? When?
- Nobody understands me!

Age of Anxiety: Aging

- I feel useless, helpless.
- I feel invisible.
- I don't understand what's happening to my body.
- I can't walk with ease. My hips ache.
- I want to belong somewhere.
- I don't have any energy. What's happening to me?
- Is there any possibility that things will go back the way they were?
- The answer to that is no! So -- how do I cope?
- Nobody understands me.

These questions fall under what I call "the ages of anxiety," puberty and aging. You will notice the similarity of the questions being asked and how the anxiety of uncertainty hovers over the teenager and the aging person.

So we return to the original question: How does one age gracefully? I would say that from the point of view of the aging person, the subject could be "aging comfortably." And then the discussion would focus on specific things that make us comfortable -- like taking a one or two-hour nap if we feel like it; allowing someone else to do the driving for various errands around town.

Perhaps an observer would regard a person who is "aging gracefully" as a person who doesn't gripe about her aches and pains, who smiles bravely when someone asks, "How are you?" and responds "Fine," when it isn't. We old ones are conscious of the endgame being final; there is no future for us, as there is for the teenager. We ask ourselves and our friends, "Will I ever experience that wonderful sense of joy and of discovery?"

I have found that the answer to that last question is: "Maybe. Keep looking and trying. You have, literally, nothing to lose."

Rhoda P. Curtis is the author of "[Rhoda: Her First Ninety Years](#)," a candid memoir of a first-generation American woman who was willing to change the direction of her life every twelve years, and "[After Ninety: What](#)." Read her blog on [Red Room](#).