

The Joys of Getting Older

How do you feel about getting older? Our society does not seem to value older people at all and there is now a trillion dollar industry world-wide convincing us that we need to do everything in our power to stop our body ageing or at least to stop it looking so old. No wonder many of us dread old age! But what if there were many hidden benefits to being older and what if we started to focus on them with gratitude for the gift of living into our golden years instead of constantly worrying about the inevitable decline in our physical body that ageing brings?

By the way, if you happen to be reading this before you have even reached your 40th birthday, just store what I am about to say in the back of your brain for future reference.

As we get older, life certainly seems to speed up exponentially doesn't it? How can it possibly be September already? One explanation for this is that as we age, we don't have so many vivid new experiences. Think back to your early years. You can probably clearly remember the first time you fell in love, the first time you travelled abroad, and the first time you lived away from your parents. I still remember my father leaving me at a Liverpool University hall of residence in October 1970 when I was just 18. It was a truly memorable moment that was a weird, but vivid, combination of fear and exhilaration.

Some psychologists suggest that to combat the blurring of experiences and the speeding up of time that tends to increase with age, we should make sure that we embark on some new adventures even in later life. Well yes, but how practical is it to travel to new far-off lands in our 70s, 80s when our body is getting a little more weak and tired year after year? So, I have some alternative suggestions this month for making the most of our short time left here on this beautiful planet and to relish the particular joys that only come with getting older.

First and foremost, as we get older, we have a wonderful opportunity to live a more authentic life without worrying so much about what other people think of us. When I was an undergraduate at Liverpool University way back when, I was so keen to impress my fellow students that I frequently twisted myself into a pretzel. For example, I once went to a dinner party with some students studying law and ended up getting horribly drunk because I was trying to look sophisticated by drinking quite a lot of red wine even though I had never drunk red wine before in my life!

These days, I could not care less about looking sophisticated. I don't even care if some people think I am a little insane. Now that I am in my 70s, I genuinely feel liberated from that awful pressure of trying to impress others. So I will order a

sweet white wine with my main course when dining out in company even though I know it is not a fashionable drink and I will watch and enjoy Strictly Come Dancing rather than some pretentious, tedious avant-garde film that I might have watched in my youth in order to impress my latest, intellectually inclined boyfriend.

Once upon a time, I believed if someone disapproved of my tastes, or even did not like me in general, it had to be my fault and I had to do my absolute best to change to try and please or placate them. These days, older and maybe just a little wiser, I know that if someone finds me irritating it is basically their problem. Of course, I still try not to irritate people because I want to be kind, but letting go of trying to impress or appease others recently has been truly liberating.

The second joyful aspect of ageing has been that I no longer worry so much about whether a particular activity is healthy or improving, rather I mainly worry about whether I am enjoying it or not. So in the bad old days of my youth, I would not eat yummy foods on the grounds that they were fattening or unhealthy, whereas now I say to myself, 'Well maybe this sugar laden treat is slowly killing me, but it will have to hurry up because it does not have that many years left to finish me off.'

The third joy of ageing - which I just happen to be experiencing a lot at the moment - is that somehow, knowing that my time on this earth is now running out pretty quickly seems to be really helping me to appreciate the ephemeral beauty of life all around me. I look at a rose blooming in our back yard for example and my heart opens up to feel such joy mixed with heartbreak at how quickly everything that is so exquisitely beautiful in our world goes from appearing to disappearing, as if it were all a magical display – which in one sense it is.

Finally, having been seriously tensed up with chronic anxiety most of my life, I am pleased to report that I am finally learning how to chill a little and to float a little more gently on the tide of life with much more of a 'What will be, will be.' and 'This too will pass.' attitude. Now of course, as Master Jason Chan once pointed out to us, while it is a really good idea to go with the flow, we should not do so like a dead fish! Putting some effort into making the best of our lives, however long we actually have left here, is so well worth it as long as our efforts are relaxed and joyful.

For example, at the moment, I am teaching Tai Chi six times a week and every time I teach, I put my heart and soul into it - which I have to confess to you tends to leave me a little tired by Thursday afternoons. But I would not give up my classes for all the Diet Coke in the USA because my students and the energy we share together bring me so much real joy and deep satisfaction.

What about you? Maybe this month, even if you are a lot younger than me, you might like to reflect on what aspects of your life have greatly improved as you have aged and whether you would really like to go back to your 20s - even though your skin was completely wrinkle free and your legs so strong you could easily run a mile – and then some.

I think that realising that we would not actually want to go back to many of our younger years is a great nudge toward understanding that getting old is far more a privilege than a pain. Whatever our current age, we can still find so much in our life to enjoy with great gratitude. Yes, in terms of years left to us, our life may now be more than half empty, but in terms of self-confidence, inner peace and deep joy, I hope that just like mine, your current life, including this never to be repeated month of September 2026, is much, much more than half full.

Peggy Foster
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