

Growing Older Gracefully



Twenty-two years ago (2001), we first came to the Brisbane area from teaching in Europe to give support to my wife's father who had recently been widowed.

As we put up our new calendars for 2023, we reminisced how all of our family members, friends and acquaintances have grown two decades older since that time – and some have passed away. In a way, time has flown by. Those of us who were only in our fifties are now in our seventies; those who were in their sixties, are now in their eighties! My father-in-law was in his late seventies, and last September passed away at 99 years of age. In looking back, it was a pleasure to see him growing older so gracefully and being filled with goodwill toward others.

As we all age, here are four perspectives that can help in growing older gracefully, and with gratitude:

Awareness

This occurs when we become aware, perhaps for the first time, that we are now, indeed, entering older age. It may be a sudden “wake-up call” through an unexpected event or situation (such as a serious illness, car accident, or death of a loved one), but does not have to be. It dawns on us that “Whether I like it or not, I’m aware of having reached the stage of life where I’m now an older person.” Maintaining awareness in all of life is important: “Remain aware and awake, regardless of what is going on. Many of our strengths and faculties decline as we age, but our ability to pay attention can be practiced, and can persevere and even grow.”

Acceptance

Acceptance is coming to terms with the fact that we are now older. We are at peace with the natural process of ageing – we no longer resist, fight, or deny what is inevitably occurring. We may also have to accept, for example, certain health issues (such as diabetes, heart

issues, high blood pressure, dental problems, osteoporosis, etc.), sometimes concomitant with ageing.

Adaptation

Having accepted ageing as a part of our life's journey, we are ready to adapt our lives accordingly. We no longer compare ourselves to the past, but are able to rest in the age we are now. "As long as we keep comparing ourselves to a younger, better self (who may have been better only in hindsight), we short-change the possibilities for becoming an older, wiser person. The wisdom of Adaptation begins in the willingness to let go of who we used to be and embrace who we are now ... The challenge of the stage of Adaptation is how well we can adjust and remain flexible as the signs of wear and tear in our world grow more noticeable. One of the clear results of current aging research is that—physically, mentally, and emotionally—those who remain flexible and roll with the punches age the best, stay the healthiest, and live the longest. Adaptation and flexibility are our best strategies for keeping abreast of our aging, and the keys to creating freshness and new opportunities as we age. We need to remember that change works both ways. It is not just wear and tear; it is also new beginnings."

Appreciation

We are grateful for our life's journey and are now able to fully live life, albeit in a different manner — namely, with growing older gracefully and meaningfully. This final stage, Appreciation, arrives when adaptation blossoms into full acceptance. "Gratitude, with no complaints, is the attitude that I would like to have, not only at the end of my life, but from now until then. May it be so for all of us!" (Sylvia Boorstein)

We have found these four perspectives for ageing helpful and meaningful — and will fall back on them as reminders for the rest of our lives. Eva's father, Henry, truly exemplified these qualities for us during his last twenty years. May this outlook on older life also be helpful for the readers of this article.

Alexander Peck, 2023

[Based on *Aging as a Spiritual Practice: A Contemplative Guide to Growing Older and Wiser* by Lewis Richmond (2012)]

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