



**mind**set

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

## aging gratefully and gracefully (revised 2013)

**A**ging can be a bewildering process in a culture that puts a premium on youth, good looks, physical prowess, money, and status. As we age, we begin to experience small diminishments and recognize that there are bigger ones to come. Time passes ever more quickly, and we can begin to feel quite fearful as we become increasingly aware of our own mortality.

When I was young and saw “old people” they seemed like a different species from me. I could not imagine myself in that state – aging was an intellectual concept that I could easily ignore. That changed when I turned 50. I went through a period where my death felt imminent. Those 50 years had gone by way too quickly and I realized I would be lucky to have another 30 years and I felt terrified. Rather than living in the present I was projecting myself to the end of my life and grieving.

Now I am turning 64 and there is even less time ahead, but I no longer feel that terror. I look back over my life and feel such gratitude for all of it. I celebrate the good, am grateful that I survived the difficulties and know that all of it has shaped who I have become. My terror has shifted to gratitude.

David and I feel very fortunate to be pretty healthy, we have had a few health scares and certainly have our chronic complaints, but nothing life threatening. We hope to be able to bicycle, hike, camp and kayak into our 70s and beyond, but we know that there are no guarantees. We grieve friends and family we have lost to cancer, accidents, or heart disease and know there is no magic shield to prevent those things from coming our way.

I feel sad when I think about eventually leaving my children and loved ones and especially regretful that I will likely not live to see grandchildren grow up. But, mostly I just

feel thankful. Growing old is a privilege. Growing old with access to good nutrition, a comfortable home, health care, and a supportive community is a priceless treasure.

Sure, we all want to do what we can to stave off the effects of aging. It is important to do what we can to remain healthy, active and vital physically. However, our underlying emotional state is crucial to our wellbeing. Fear of aging and death is a natural part of life, but we do not have to let it consume us or cause us to desperately and unattractively cling to the trappings of youth. If we can face our fears, draw comfort from within, draw strength from those who have gone before us, and stay grounded in the present moment we will be able to find meaning and joy all the way to our last breath.

Old age is a gift that many do not receive. It is a chance to look back on our lives and all that we have been through and done. We have witnessed vast changes. From the vantage point of many years, troubles are put into perspective and we can offer comfort to younger generations who are in the throes of the whitewater of life.

More leisure time can provide an opportunity to contribute in ways that have not been possible before. Time for contemplation, writing and reading and the myriad of activities and pursuits available to us will allow us to continue to make our lives rich and rewarding.

Research on happiness consistently shows that older adults are among the happiest. I think happiness stems from the ability to be fully present in the moment. I think the awareness of the fleeting and fragile nature of our lives brings an enormous gratitude for simply being alive in this beautiful world. If we are lucky, old age will come to each of us, my hope is to embrace it gratefully and graciously, living each moment as fully as possible right up until the end! ❧❧

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