

AGING GRACEFULLY

A monologue for a mature lady

By Don Mathews

(corrected 18th Nov.with Jackie Hurtly's notes)

I'm trying very hard to age gracefully. But let me tell you, it's not easy. Once you reach a certain age, the process seems to accelerate by leaps and bounds. Every year you discover more tiny wrinkles, and you're progressively aware of strange little lumps in odd places about your body never noticed before. Your movements are definitely slower, your agility is not what it once was and your reflexes are certainly not those of a teenager. Your skin starts sagging, your memory is shaky, your feet seem unnecessarily cramped in any pair of shoes you put on and if you go to a party, you're usually end up falling asleep about ten thirty. It's fairly cruel to begin discovering all these symptoms for yourself, but if you have a daughter like mine, you'll be reminded frequently of your failings, often in terms that are not in the least subtle.

"Mum, you look fat", she said a few days ago when we were having lunch together. Ok, fine, I think everyone should be honest, and I prefer her to have this attitude rather than never telling me the truth. But really. there must be other ways to go about it. Couldn't she try to be a little more diplomatic? For example, she could have asked if maybe I had put on a couple of kilos in the last month or so, or told me she thought the dress I was wearing was a fraction too tight. But no, she simply said I looked fat.

Well, maybe I'll concede I have gained a bit of weight in the last few months. But then of course, my daughter had to add insult to injury when at the end of the meal I ordered dessert. I was just raising my fork with a piece of cake, when she repeated one of my own mother's favourite sayings. Smiling sarcastically she said, "a moment on the lips, ten minutes in the stomach and a lifetime on the hips."

Really, that could certainly put anyone off their pudding, couldn't it?

Well, thinking back on my attitude toward my own parents, and I can now understand how each generation is prone to develop a critical eye toward the aging of their elders, so I'm not really very surprised my daughter has picked it up. But let me tell you, she's picked it up with a vengeance. Oh don't get me wrong. I love her dearly and we do have some wonderful times together. But when she decides to be critical, she certainly doesn't mince her words.

Thinking back, I know I found fault with my ageing parents. I was convinced they were becoming obsessed with growing old. I used to kid them about the amount of money they spent on pills in the health shops, the number of doctors' appointments they had every week and their obsession with getting enough exercise. I know they read somewhere that to lower one's cholesterol, and for one's heart, one should walk at least three kilometres a day. This suddenly became the rule and had to be rigorously carried out. Obviously having a dog was a great

excuse for complying with this physical commitment, so they insisted on dragging Betsy, their lovely but ancient Basset hound on marathon hikes through the hills behind their house twice a day. Poor Betsy couldn't wait to get home where she could flop, exhausted, in front of the fireplace giving in to the deep slumber that only canines seem to achieve, snoring contentedly and occasionally trumpeting odorously. I know my parents claimed they felt regenerated after all this healthy living, and I admired them for it. But then every day about seven in the afternoon they happily disregarded all the good the vigorous exercise, careful diet and many vitamin pills had done them, by mixing themselves the first little cocktail of the day and settled down contentedly to watch the evening news on the tele. When I commented that I wondered if maybe only having a drink on the weekend would be wiser, my mother looked offended, and said, "So you want to take away another of our little pleasures, do you?" I didn't fully understand her at the time, but I certainly do now. My daughter insists that consuming a couple of glasses of wine with our evening meal is eventually going to ruin our livers. She won't listen to me when I tell her the doctors all say a little red wine is good for the heart. She looks at me and says, "Oh, you only believe what you want to, don't you."

Now, I never in a million years would have imagined myself becoming an almost exact replica of my own mother with all her little ticks and obsessions, but my daughter's astute sense of observation keeps reminding me of the similarities. "My god, mummy," she exclaimed not too long ago, studying the row of little pill bottles on our breakfast table. "You're just like Granny.

Are you two trying to single handedly keep that little health shop on Market Street afloat?”

Seeing the collection through her eyes did give me a slight guilt complex, but I maintained they were all doing us a world of good. She had picked up one of the little bottles and raised her eyebrows seeing the label with the rather exorbitant price still on it.

“Do you realize,” I said trying to sound convincing, “they claim that one of those little cod liver oil pills every day could actually prolong your life by five years?” She shrugged her shoulders and picked up another little bottle that was even more expensive than the first one. You know I’m positive she has radar to zoom in on these things.

But the worst was the day she literally caught me coming out of one of the most famous and expensive beauty salons in town. I had just turned sixty-five, was beginning to feel my age and urgently needed something to give me a lift. Several months before I had been informed by the big boss at the company where I had worked for 32 years as a secretary, that they appreciated my loyal service to the company but that I had reached the obligatory age of retirement. Let me tell you it was a tough blow. In any case I smiled my way through a farewell party which all 212 of my fellow co-workers attended, sipping sparkling wine and munching on tiny cucumber sandwiches. But rather than cheering me up and making me feel I had been an important part of the company or even been a bit useful, I felt more as

though I was being let out to pasture. There were speeches by my boss and several of the company's top directors, most of which I didn't hear. I was given an expensive wristwatch, which I tried to look enthusiastic about, smiling my thanks, but knowing full well I would never wear a jewelled watch. Later, the administrative head handed me an envelope which I stuck in my handbag and didn't open until much later. Then when I did, I was astonished to find a check for a considerable amount of money, which a brief note explained were for Holidays which I hadn't taken in the last four years. My first thought was to put it in our savings account to maybe go for a special trip at some later date. While trying to decide what to do with it, I put it in the current account and forgot about it for a few weeks. I told John about it and I remember him mumbling something about that being the least the damn company could do for someone who put in so much over time without complaining.

Anyway, one day I saw an ad on the tele, which intrigued me. I know, everyone tells me I should never believe in advertising, but I fell for the it. Well, you see I have to confess I'm convinced there's this special little section of my brain that is reserved solely for issues that have to do with believing in miracles. I can't help it, but I have this overwhelming, almost childish faith, in wanting to believe the most fantastic promises, a subject you can well imagine I avoid like the plague with my daughter. Really, I know I should be embarrassed to admit it, but every now and then I'm captured by some proposition offered on the tele or in a magazine and some little voice inside me says, this is it, this one is really going to work. Of course most of these propositions have

to do with some way of not exactly stopping, but maybe slowing down the aging process. Anyway, this ad I was talking about stated that in only eight sessions, one could be rejuvenated, see the years slipping off, and regain one's self esteem. They offered an intensive series of sessions with massages, different types of thermic baths and creams and god knows what else. Of course, I was completely stupid to think I would look like the woman in the commercial in eight sessions, and another section of my brain warned me to think twice, but I blithely ignored the second voice and called and made an appointment to start in a week.

I must admit that after the first session I felt wonderful. It's probably a feeling similar to one you might have after visiting a Spa. Water, massages and creams can certainly have a very positive affect on you. After each session I felt all tingly, and alive. And naturally there was a lot of coddling going on by the lovely young girls who attended me and continuously reminded me how fantastic the treatments were and how much improvement they could see each day. I know, one loves to be told what one wants to hear, and, of course I believed everything they said. At the end of the eight sessions I was given a bonus, which was having my hair cut and styled and a complete facial and make-up job without any extra charge.

I was ushered into a room that looked to me more like a film studio than a hair dresser's. A lovely young girl in a pale blue uniform focused a video camera on me and suddenly I saw myself on a screen. Then, as she pressed buttons and moved a

mouse, I saw my face with different hair styles, both straight on and in profile. I could see what I would look like with wild curls, or a straight and sexy bob, very twenties, or a wind-swept hair-do. It was then up to me to decide which style. It took a long time as she had a very convincing way of explaining how my particular hair texture, which to me had always been thin and rather fly-away, would react best to a short, shingled treatment. Then with that haircut on the screen, she showed me what it would look like in a different colour, or maybe a slightly lighter shade or maybe even darker. We decided two tones lighter looked best.

Three hours later when they were finished with my hair, and everyone around had had a chance to admire it, I was given over to another stylist, this one a pretty redhead wearing a yellow uniform, who began by giving me a complete facial. Then another very lovely girl (this one in green) took over, doing a makeup job which seemed to take forever. When she had finished, she leaned up close and said, "Luv, I don't just say this to everybody, but really, you look absolutely fabulous."

I caught my image in one of the many mirrors when I handed over about a third of my holiday money to the cashier, thinking I looked pretty good but wondering how my family, especially my daughter, were going to react. I must say, I felt quite rejuvenated, but thinking back, a lot of it probably had to do with wanting to feel good and also from the brainwashing those young girls were continuously bombarding me with.

I walked out onto the pavement and hadn't gone more than three

steps when, yes, you guessed it – I literally ran straight into my daughter. Unbelievable! In such a large city, how was it possible we were on the very same street at the very same moment? I was somewhat disappointed that she recognized me, thinking I must look wildly different. When she saw me up close, rather than being told how fantastic I looked, she exclaimed, “Mum, what the hell were you doing in THAT place?” “Oh,” I said, “well, I was just pampering myself a bit”. She didn’t comment, but just shook her head, and invited me for a coffee. She did grudgingly admit later that my hair looked OK.

Before starting the treatments in the beauty salon, I had entered a photomat and had some passport sized photos taken. And so just to see the change, when I left my daughter I went back to have some more taken. I went to have another coffee to scrutinize the two sets of photos side by side. After a while, I came to the sad conclusion, that in both sets of photos, it was exactly the same old face with the same flaws, the same wrinkles and laugh lines but in the second set the hair was shorter and slightly lighter, and I was very much aware that same old face was wearing far too much makeup. I was reminded of a remark my best friend Barbara made one day when she saw a photo of an aging movie star in a magazine. She studied the photo for a moment then looked up and said, “Women over a certain age shouldn’t wear too much makeup, because all it does is stick in the cracks”.

So anyway, before going home, I went into the loo and tried to remove a good deal of the makeup. John’s only comment when I

walked in was “why did you get your hair cut so short? Oh well, I guess it will grow back.” Before turning back to his newspaper he asked, “What’s for dinner?”

In the kitchen, I started humming a Sinatra tune I hadn’t thought about in years and said to myself. “Hey, it’s not a question of how I look, but how I feel. And you know what? I feel fantastic.”

In any case, I didn’t dare tell Barbara about how foolish I’d been, as she was always going on about how most advertising was designed to seduce you into believing that any product was wonderful. No matter what good friends we were, I knew she would never understand my need to actually believe in miracles. Well, maybe there hadn’t been a physical miracle, but I had certainly been given a moral boost, and as those come few and far between, I was quite happy about it.

Anyway Barbara, who had retired about the same time I did, confessed that with no husband, and grown children away in other cities, she was really bored living alone and would like to do something. For many years Barbara had been a makeup artist for a production company that made advertising commercials. I understood she was good at her job and really enjoyed it. Several times when she complained about boredom, I asked why she had retired, and I got the impression she simply thought it was what one had to do at her age.

But, one day she called me.

“Guess what,” she exclaimed breezily, “They haven’t found anyone they like yet on a permanent basis, and want me to come back, and have offered me a half day job, only working in the mornings.”

“That’s perfect”, I exclaimed, thinking how lucky she was. “It sounds ideal”.

“Yeah, well I don’t really know,” she answered. “I’m seriously thinking about not accepting it.”

“You’re joking”, I said, “but you wanted something to do, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” she admitted. “I did. But really, if I have to work five mornings a week, when am I going to have time for all my doctors’ appointments?”

I laughed, but you know in a way it’s true these things do seem to pile up. I just looked at my calender for next week, which I’d say is a fairly typical week. Now listen to this – Monday morning dentist at ten –Tuesday at six a visit to Dr. Robertson to remove a wart under my left arm - Wednesday I’m playing golf with Barbara, so there’s no doctors involved there – Thursday I’m going with John to have a x-ray of his left shoulder —And Friday I was originally supposed to go to the chiroprapist, but his secretary cancelled it until next week.- and Saturday at ten I have to take our cat to the vet to have her vaccination. See what I mean, these visits never stop. Wih this schedule, I wouldn’t be able to keep a job either, would I?

Anyway, I can’t forget my daughter’s comment about being fat, which has stayed with me all week, making me all too conscious

of the size of my hips. Well, you're going to laugh, but I have on my list of things to buy for today some pills I saw advertised that are supposed to reduce your appetite. I suppose it must be true that if you reduce your intake of food, you're certainly not going to gain any more weight. Now that doesn't even sound like a miracle to me, but down to earth logic, don't you think? Oh, speaking of hips, reminds me of one of my mother's comments that has been repeated over and over by the family through the years. She was quite musical and a fairly accomplished pianist. When my parents moved into their current flat, the only place for their old upright was in the entry hall. One day she was standing there by the piano saying goodbye to John and I, and for some reason she backed up slightly, and losing her balance sat down on the keyboard. "My goodness," she exclaimed. "two and a half octaves!! I have to go on a diet."

All this reminds me of another distressing fact about aging. And that is, the loss of one's memory. It's something that seems to be happening to everyone over the age of fifty. I've got to the point now where I have to write everything down. If I don't, and only trust my memory, I find myself in the embarrassing situation of missing far too much. My mind plays tricks on me, making me positive something was on Tuesday, rather than Monday, or I was supposed to be there at 6 when it was actually 5. So unfortunately, I simply can't rely on my memory any more. Oh, but do you believe it, I can recall every detail of an outfit I had when I was eighteen, how I wore my hair, what my accessories were: the shoes, the gloves – Yes every detail. Now why is it I seem to have difficulty remembering what I had for breakfast

today? I mean, after all, that was only a few hours ago. Wasn't it?

Oddly enough I have no problem remembering the remarks the various members of my family often make.

"Mum," my daughter said not so long ago, "you're not going out in that dress, are you? It looks like something great aunt Vivian used to wear. Where the hell did you get it?" And I thought I looked quite presentable in a simple little flowered sheath I had found in the sales.

But then again, this contrasts with a comment I overheard my granddaughter make a few days later to a friend who was visiting. "Have you seen? Granny's wearing jeans today. I guess she's reliving her hippy days."

I suppose I'm fortunate my husband usually doesn't notice my clothes. But occasionally he will suddenly object to a skirt which he thinks is too short, or a blouse which he feels is cut too low in the front. I don't know if he has become more conservative, or if he is just trying to protect me because he thinks I am making a fool of myself.

If you think the years don't pass for others, look up people you haven't seen for a long time. A couple of years ago I went to a 35th anniversary of my class at business school. I was really shocked at some of the men who at one time I had considered attractive, but many were practically unrecognizable because they were terribly overweight, grey, or completely bald. The women hadn't aged too gracefully either, although I thought that

on the whole they looked better than the men. Studying the photos we had taken that day, I didn't feel I looked nearly as ravaged as many of them. I did give myself points for having a fairly slim figure, and, considering the years, I still had a waist. I had also been very conservative that day in the makeup department, which in the photos made me look more natural than several of my classmate who had piled on the war paint making them look like they were wearing masks.

Probably one of the most difficult things for someone my age is trying to strike a happy medium as far as appearance is concerned. I've been told by my daughter that women my age should never wear their hair long, because it makes them look like they're trying to appear younger. But on the other hand, every time I have it cut nice and short, my husband complains because he thinks it looks butch. When shopping for clothes in the department stores I try to steer clear of the trendy young women's sections, but if I pick out things that are more conservative my daughter accuses me of trying to look like the mother of the bride. You just can't win, can you? At one point I started really trying to notice what women my age were wearing. Women I considered attractive, and who seemed to be comfortable with their age. Most of them looked very good in well-cut trouser suits, so I bought several outfits, spending a fair amount of money, but thinking I could probably get lots of wear out of them. One evening I took my daughter to the theatre to see a play we were both interested in. I was feeling that I looked quite presentable and elegant for a change. She studied my outfit for a moment then quipped, "so we're not wearing skirts any

more, are we?"

Wouldn't it be glorious if there were a book of general rules to follow, sort of like a bible for aging gracefully. Chapters that gave you general information on how to dress for different occasions, how to act in a variety of situations, what to do with your hair, what kind of creams are best for your skin, how to retain a trim figure and maintain your memory and especially, how to deal with outspoken daughters.

Unfortunately, the rules would never fit everyone. I can see that now.

So I've come to the conclusion that no matter what people say to my face, or even behind it, I'm planning on just being myself and not worrying too much about trying to conform to anything I'm not. Let's face it, you can't please everybody.

In any case, I don't think I'm more vain than the next woman, but there are times when you look in the mirror and it seems as though the aging process has suddenly been speeded up. Recently I've become more conscious of the tiny little creases around my eyes. In the last few months they seem to have multiplied. Now I don't think I would ever submit myself to a full-fledged face lift, but I certainly wouldn't be against doing something to slow down the course of these small wrinkles spreading more.

Well, the other day I was glancing through one of my favourite magazines, and rather by accident I saw this article about new

products for anti-aging. Naturally I started reading it and was very impressed with one particular face cream that claims to be revolutionary. There were several endorsements from men who looked like they could have been doctors and at least ten testimonies from different women of it's effectiveness, with photographs of them before and after they used it. Oh I'm sure they're probably retouched, but I could really imagine how I might look after using it. I know you're probably going to laugh, but yes, I fell for it. Well, yesterday I sent off for a free sample and more information. Oh I'm sure it's going to work marvellously well.

Anyway, could I ask you, no matter how YOU feel about this, PLEASE, please don't tell my daughter.