

Someone to Love, Something to Do, Something to Look Forward To

By Jennifer James - Spring, 2018



We seniors represent the first generation in America to have significantly longer lives. In 1900, the average American lifespan for women was 48; for men, it was 46. Now our average lifespan is 81 for women and 76 for men. Yet for some, living longer doesn't automatically mean being happier—and discontent spikes when we encounter what gerontologists call the four plagues: loneliness, boredom, helplessness, and meaninglessness.

We know that the antidote to these plagues is threefold: someone to love, something to do, and something to look forward to. Given our position as lifespan pioneers, we may need to hone new survival skills. If basic survival is under control, what is next?

Historically, people have lived past 90 but we know little of their lives unless they made the news or live in one of the so-called “blue zones” (places in the world where many people live unusually long, healthy lives). Celebrities teach us a bit. George Burns told jokes until he died at 100. Tony Bennett is 91 and still singing. Betty White is working at 96, as is Sidney Poitier at 91. Staying with a known career solves the “something to do.” LaLa LaLanne continues to promote fitness at age 91, and Jack LaLanne did so until his death at 96.

Scientists, writers, and artists may find their passions remain. Oliver Sacks worked until his death at 82. People continue to create by modifying methods and tools. When he was diagnosed with disabling abdominal cancer, Henri Matisse moved from painting to paper collage until his

death at 84. Georgia O'Keeffe stopped painting with oils as she lost her peripheral vision, but she found other mediums to explore.

But what if our life has not revolved around such notable passions? We can find something—or someone. Years ago, an older man came to my door and offered to fix anything in exchange for homemade cookies. Something made me accept the deal. He was lonely, fixing things was his passion, and I needed help. Bob was a roller dancer and his first love and early skate partner had been married for 50 years to someone else. He still skated every Sunday and one day he saw her at the rink. She was a widow and had decided to try to skate again. He never came back to my house; he sent a note saying he had found someone to love.

What if the intensity that motivated you for most of your adult life cannot be continued? If you are content, enjoy. If not, keep searching, keep learning new things, and make an effort to know those who you see around you. (My mail person and I both raise canaries.) Give to others, help your community, get out of the house (even in the rain), fight isolation. It turns out that planning your week—whether regular meetings with friends, daily walks, reading, errands, meals, and other things—is reassuring.

Something to look forward to, beyond celebrations with family and friends, may be hard to find unless you travel, collect something, or are mentoring young people who you see need a boost. I correspond with a talented university student who worked for me one summer. Through email, I counsel a few people I have never met who reached out to me. I look forward to their happiness.

There are many ways to quietly love, and we can look forward to being with loved ones and enjoying their lives—a partner, friends, grandchildren, other family members. Grandchildren are the true miracles of my 60s and early 70s. They provide all three facets of the “plagues” antidote. I was able to witness the births of my two youngest because of my lovely daughter-in-law. When I saw their little faces emerge, it was the supreme moment of my life. I've made the time to watch, to listen, to play, and be a child again myself. We sing songs, create rituals, exchange jokes, and do experiments found on YouTube.

When they moved to Hawaii, I followed them. Don't worry; I got my own place and I relieve their hardworking parents every weekend during the months when it's cold back in Seattle. (What would I have done if they had moved to North Dakota?) They are now 7 and 9, so in a few years, they will have other plans—and I will need other plans, too.

It is never too late to make a new friend or revive an old friendship, but you have to make the effort and keep it up until it becomes effortless. When you feel lonely, don't settle; join a club or go to a social event, even if it turns out to be boring. You can “choose your plague.”

I wrote this column to remind myself of the remedies to those four plagues because I have been in pain from arthritis and that distorts my perspective. Despite having someone to love and many options for doing, I had lost the feeling of something to look forward to. I was suffering the plague of meaninglessness. Writing this, reaching out to you, has restored my perspective. Life is good.