

Four Steps to Growing Older Gracefully

By Karen O'Connor

The year I turned 50 I did something remarkable — remarkable for me, that is. I signed up for an all-women beginner's backpack trip in Yosemite National Park. Hiking to the top of the famous Half Dome had been a dream of mine for many years, so when the opportunity arose, I went for it. I spent months getting in shape with weekly workouts, and learned all I could about tents, boots, backpacks and dehydrated food.

When I returned home, I was eight pounds lighter and felt 10 years younger! I committed then to do at least one thing each year that would stretch me in an exciting way. Today I look back over a myriad of activities that have expanded my life in ways I never could have imagined — from teaching myself to sketch to raising African violets and taking a ropes course with my grandson! Other people I've spoken with have found ways to enlarge their lives, too. Perhaps the following steps will encourage you, as they have me, to grow older with grace — rather than with regret.

Enrich the Lives of Those Close to You: My friend Marie shared a wonderful example of this precept from her life. When she married her husband he was an avid fisherman. Marie had never held a pole or a worm in her life!

"The first gift I received from my groom was a rod and reel," she said, laughing. "I made up my mind early on to enter his world. I wanted to be with Norm." It didn't matter to Marie what they did as long as they were together. Before long, Marie was fishing with the best of them. One year, she even won a trophy. And she surprised Norm with an amusing gift: 'his and her' fishing jackets! "It was certainly a new fashion statement for me," she quipped.

Get out of your comfort zone. Is there someone in your life who longs to have you enter his or her world in a unique way? **Be willing to share a hobby or interest.** Consider watching a couple of action movies with your husband between your favorite "chick flicks." If a friend loves to swim, shake off your fear of being seen in a swimming suit and offer to accompany them; **when you agree to sample a friend's interests, it shows them that you care about being in their company — not just that you've "sacrificed" to be with them.**

Experiment with Activities that Take You Out of Your Routines: Several months ago I decided on the spur of the moment to take a long walk in the Carlsbad Flower Fields near my home. I grabbed a snack, a bottle of water, a sun hat and my car keys and off I went. I returned home a few hours later, tired but fulfilled. On other days I've taken a few moments away from my desk to sit in silence and listen to soothing music or to bring a lawn chair to the park and doodle on my art pad.

No matter what I choose, I come home **refreshed** and ready to take up my life again. And my husband has noticed subtle changes in me — **for the better!** **The energy that comes from these activities restores my joy**

Attack the "I'll-Do-It-Tomorrow" Projects You've Been Dreading: The longer things go not getting done, the bigger they loom in your conscience. Quit staring at that pile of paving stones in the back yard and start laying the foundation for the Mexican patio you envisioned. Begin the process of cleaning out the garage so you can actually park your cars inside. Put a "for free" sign on the weight bench you never use, and drag it out to the curb. You'll be surprised at how much lighter you feel!

The list of "I-Don't-Wanna's" goes on and on. But when you've taken care of yourself first, these projects no longer seem so overwhelming. You may find you actually look forward to ticking them off your list. Our neighbor Marvin told me the best time for him to do chores is after he plays golf on Saturday. "I come home in a pleasant frame of mind — even when I don't play well."

My husband and I had put off repainting the interior of our home. It seemed too big a job for us and too costly to hire someone else. Then one day, Charles poked his head into my home office and said, "If it's okay with you, I'm going to take off the wallpaper today. There's no going back once I do, so what do you say?" I gulped, then agreed.

"This is great," he called out a day later, as he mounted the ladder and ran the roller across the ceiling in the first room. "I'm already thinking about how beautiful it's going to look." And it was. As we marveled at the transformation of the newly-refurbished room, we must have shared the same thought: *Why did we wait so long?*

Painting might not be your thing, but think about the big projects you've procrastinated doing for months or years. Then heed the command of a certain athletic shoe company, "JUST DO IT!"

To quote Theodore Roosevelt, "Do what you can, with what you have, where you are."

The Ultimate Key To Aging Gracefully: The more focused you become on enriching the lives of others, the more sense of purpose you'll have. The more you begin to explore new interests, the more engaged with life you'll become. The more you begin to tackle long-postponed projects, the more empowered you'll feel. All these things put in to practice will result in a heightened enthusiasm for life. The more energized and optimistic you feel, the more you'll be moved to express your gratitude to God. Thank Him for this wonderful life you've been given. A spirit of gratitude, more than anything else, will help determine whether you grow old gracefully — or just grow old.