

Ageless Spirits

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Who has never heard the phrase, “With age comes wisdom”? That’s not good enough for me. I live on the premise that “age is just a number.” You are only too old to do something, or try to do something, after you have left this planet.

I don’t mean that physical limitations are non-existent – just that the effort to overcome them and keep ourselves open to possibilities is a better road, and makes for a healthy life, no matter to what “number” we admit. It is wrong to let a fear of looking silly because one has more numbers, or of having something bad happen to us, keep us from doing things that will expand our horizons and bring us joy.

Not a single person goes through life without some grief and distress. But the happy people are the ones who look back and realize that even with these events, they had a preponderance of good in their lives.

You could say this attitude of mine runs in the family. My father died at my number One. But before his death he suggested to my mother, “Be like a sundial. Only record the sunny hours.”

You know something? People appreciate it when you don’t tell them about all the little and big tragedies in your life. We all have our own about which to keep our silence.

But sharing the adventures and the joys – that’s another thing! Here are a couple of mine.

In August 1981, during Eid el Fetr, my husband John and I travelled to Egypt from our home in Al Khobar, Saudi Arabia. We just

needed a short vacation and since his office had closed to mark the end of Ramadan, we took advantage and left for a few days.

I always encounter Egypt as a land of mystery, and love to wander the ancient monuments to a civilization long gone, marks left upon the land and now our minds by others in search of answers. How did these monolithic stone pyramids and temples become reality before the age of mechanism with which we are so familiar?

Afterwards we browsed through the museum and shopped in some of the bazaars, thoroughly enjoying our hiatus from the pressure of work. At least for John it was away from work. For me, it was the pleasure of returning to a well-loved place.

We rested on the balcony of our hotel after an excursion to the Khan e Khali, wondering what we should do next. “How about a short cruise down the Nile?” I remarked as I noticed the cruise ships sitting at anchor near the hotel.

“How about an early return to Khobar?” John responded. I suppose this wasn’t too surprising since I knew how much John preferred work to leisure. So I dropped the subject of departure quickly and instead leafed through the local paper. Suddenly my attention was caught by a picture and its caption: “Mother Teresa in Cairo.”

I scanned the article and found the address of her mission house: Moski, 5 Atfet al Franq. Maybe this would be the perfect end to our little journey! I decided to go and visit her.

If you’ve never been to Cairo, you cannot imagine the hazards involved in going somewhere by taxi. I name it: “Ready, Aim, Fire! Watch out, here I come!” Red lights don’t even slow drivers down, let alone make them stop to see if traffic is coming from the other



direction. The three hours devoted to finding that address were amongst the most frazzling experiences of my life. And after all that the driver never did find it, so we returned to the hotel, exhausted and ready to call it quits.

But the following day was my birthday. I decided that I would make it special by locating the elusive address. I chose a different driver from the line-up in front of our hotel, and he assured me that of course he could locate 5 Atfet al Franq! It took several hours and several questions of several sorts of people, until I asked a French priest. Finally, someone who really knew!

The mission house door was opened by one of the Sisters of Mercy. She invited me to come in and said Mother would be with me shortly, as now she was tending the sick. There were three other women waiting to meet her. We introduced ourselves to each other and waited patiently for Mother to arrive.

Many people have mentioned the special magnetism of this dedicated holy woman. But nothing prepared me for the actuality of meeting her and feeling it myself. As she welcomed us, she said, "How lovely of you to come to visit me during your vacation."

One of the visitors was a journalist who had come to Cairo especially to interview Mother Teresa, and it was quite amazing to hear her responses to the questions posed. The first was, "What led you

to leave your teaching and become absorbed in the care of dying people in slums around the world?"

Her simple answer was, "God called me to it."

As though a catalyst had taken effect, Mother Teresa continued in a very evenly paced manner to express her concern for those who lack



love and tenderness in their lives. "Do you have any idea how many people everywhere – Canada, U.S. Australia – I could name every country in the world! are starving – no, not for food, but for love? It's not just the poor and destitute. Many rich people are even more deprived because they can't purchase love. Those we care for need to know that someone loves them, *really* loves them. They find that love in the way we tend them in their dying moments. And of course, we are so happy to share what we can from what God has given to us. We don't distinguish here between Christians, Moslems, Hindus or any other people of any faith or no faith. They are all creatures of the same Creator."

Mother Teresa spoke to us in this vein for about two hours. We didn't remark the passing of time. The visit ended too soon. Time had disappeared like mist on the early

morning horizon. She clasped our hands in her two small ones and gave me a birthday kiss on my cheek.



As she walked us to the door, she mentioned a space that had been donated to her hospice's use, but situated on the top floor of an old monastery. She needed some advice on how to get the people she collected up to that floor. I mentioned that my husband was an engineer and might be able to advise her. She accepted, and I quickly returned to the hotel to collect him – amazingly, now that I knew the way, the taxi rides were direct! The rest of the day, until almost dinner time, was spent consulting with her and arranging for an expert in elevators to call on her.

It was now our turn to leave. She kissed us both on our two cheeks and gave me a special greeting for my birthday. Our return through the streets of old Cairo was swift but the impression left upon my consciousness will never leave me.

You have gathered by now that every chance I have, I return to that special historical land. Recently an extremely interesting group, led by a good friend who is an expert on Egypt, was leading a spiritual and informative trip there. In my previous two trips I had not seen a fraction of what was calling to me. The mystery and history of the significant things to be seen, not even remotely available here in Calgary, decided me. I emptied my savings and registered as a participant – as excited as a number Ten!

Departure was out of Vancouver. Twice my flight was returned. Since I would be missing a lot of the excursion, I could have just gone home then. But not me! I did continue and finally arrived in Cairo.

I had no idea where the group was staying and had neglected to

obtain a contact phone number. There are no phone books in Egypt, so I couldn't call around to the hotels to try to locate my friends. However, I *did* have an agenda, and decided to wait at the only entrance to the Cairo Museum for my group to arrive. They found me – sure, yes, a little tired – but the rest of the excursion was wonderful.

All the younger participants were in much better physical shape than I am. I have neglected my body for too many years to expect it to function at the level I was asking of it. Most of the temples are located at the top of long staircases, or up a steep hill. We went up and down these impediments [for me at least] at each site. Of course, each time I huffed and puffed until finally I caught up with the group, thereby missing much of the explanation of symbols found on walls of crypts and temple rooms. I could have moaned and groaned and asked them all to go at a slower pace, but why draw attention to my weakness? I did my best and made a resolve to improve my physical stamina. My first session of exercise upon my return has left me a little stiff, but with a stronger determination to keep up with the group the next time I travel. And I will travel again!

If something is missing in your capacity to enjoy life, look to improve it to the best of your ability. Don't mourn the loss of something you did or had at a lower number. You're at a good number now, so celebrate the things you can still do and enjoy. Learn more about what pleases you the most, or learn something new and advanced, like the computer. I did and now I shout (figuratively) "Look at me! I'm with it!"

Let me share how this happened for me – and I hadn't known the



initial fear would become what is now joy... Or should I name it rather addiction? Sometimes a bolt from the blue hits and one hit me not long ago: I must be addicted to my computer and the Internet. This shock came on the day my computer crashed. I had to wait four days for repairs. I can't say how many times I sat at the computer staring with consternation at the blank screen. This was dreadful withdrawal.

Sixteen years before I'd refused to even consider any attempt to master this "strange, incredible machine." It presented a threat to an important activity in my life. Data storage on a computer became part of my volunteer position with the St. Vincent de Paul Society. I was given a laptop and the address for a beginner's course. My ability and comfort level with the technological side of computers was less than zero. I feared that this expensive machine might blow up just to prove my status of electronic klutz. During WW2 I'd been a wireless operator in the Air Force, but had never overcome my unerring ability to blow fuses at random and my fear of electric shock. How would this time be any different?

However, I was passionate about working with needy people and so bit the bullet. And you know, it was not as traumatic as I had feared it would be.

Today there is no way I would voluntarily give up my computer. Nor would I abandon the Internet. It is my reliable connection to friends and family around the world. I chat with people who don't see my wrinkles or know my age – it's like putting on a clown's white face and letting my spirit of adventure soar. What a wonderful release for my inner child!

I teach bridge at Senior Centres and urge my students, if not already online, to consider it. If their answer is absolute negativity, I regret that they choose to close a door on something that offers so many options for everyone. Our grandkids are computer literate before they can read and write, so we should at least venture a bit. It is a challenge to put ourselves on the cutting edge of technology at our "Golden Age". But there is so much we gain! For example, there is a fantastic bridge zone on the net, available at any hour of the day or night. You will find me there in the wee small hours when sleep is illusive. Addiction? Probably, but not a harmful one.

The Internet reduces my feeling of isolation during the evenings and lessens my reliance on friends and family. I exchange pictures of people, gardens and pets with friends all over the world. Replies to email are almost immediate, even over immense distances. Laughter, one of the greatest healers known to us, comes in abundance via email jokes every day. Many have found partners for Chess, Cribbage, Scrabble and many other games [including marriage!].

Within our mature population we often find loneliness and sometimes physical conditions confine a person to their home. Many seniors are no longer able to drive and cannot involve themselves in activities to eliminate loneliness. Families are much more mobile, and we can't expect our children and grandchildren to re-arrange their lifestyle to cope with our inadequacies. Internet connections help to make life more liveable for those who want to remain independent but are unhappy with the paucity of activity in their life. After listening to me recently, one friend agreed to a very brief trial using the mouse to play Solitaire, then remarked, "Do you know, this looks like fun...."



As a “wannabe” writer, I can research facts about my subject day or night. If you’re reading this and you’re at as high a number as me, you know exactly what I’m talking about – we’re both online! Who would have thought that at our lower numbers?

And speaking of lower numbers, enjoy any children with whom you come in contact. Learn to reach their level of enthusiasm and let them know that you like doing silly things with them. Make them laugh uproariously and then bask in their approval. If this is difficult for you, I recommend a clown nose with glasses, or buck teeth. If you are really daring, put on a white face and surprise them with your ability to make them laugh – because a child doesn’t expect that from as high numbers as I have. In a white clown face, you have a disguise and can be anyone you want to be.. If you read stories to your grandchildren, or great-grandchildren, make the story into a play and use different voices for the characters. Gesticulate with abandon to make sure that what you read to them comes alive in the way you read it.

You see, the person you were at the number Six still lives in your spirit, but is now full of wisdom. Look at my memory of Mother Theresa. It sustains me often when life becomes difficult. It was a magic moment in my life, a true gift for my birthday, and I made a resolve to begin caring more for others than for myself. Taking the example of this little woman, this ageless spirit with the humble manner in which she regarded her celebrity, is one of the most potent lessons anyone could learn. And I want to pass that on.

Celebrate the fact that you have lived as many years as you have. Don’t mourn losses too long, rather learn to replace the loss with a gain. Smile more than you keep a straight face. Make sure that

your great wisdom is used in a constructive manner – meaning, don’t pontificate on your expertise or give unsolicited advice. And please, don’t speak in a derisive way about changes in young people that shock you. Remember some of the things you did that shocked your grandparents when you were at a lower number! Did you want to listen to such things then? Why say them now?

Inside your beautifully crinkled skin also lives the number Eighteen, when you owned the world. Every experience you have had makes you the person of wisdom you are today – no matter what number the calendar connects with your birthday.



Verna Blanchard

“Humour and acceptance of silliness have always been of utmost importance to me. I find it hard to believe that I have reached such a high number, so I add the two numbers together (81) and this year I permit myself to act somewhat like a 9 year old – showing the same compassion to others that I would like for myself, as Mother Theresa taught me.”



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