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Do What You Can
Accept the Rest

by
[REDACTED]

*Excellent paper.
(see comments
on back of
last page.)*

Aspects of Aging
Dr. Harold Salmon
July 21, 1992

*Good
introduction*

"If you can't afford porterhouse steaks, you buy hotdogs." Those words sum up my seventy-one year old uncle's philosophy on life. Acceptance of the way things are and adapting to what life deals him is the key to his success in navigating through life.

Edward [REDACTED] was born and raised the fourth child and second son to a Polish immigrant couple. He has lived his entire life in Missouri, except for his time spent in the Army during World War II. Ed learned the value of the work ethic and adaptation to life as it comes early in his life. His father worked as a coal miner, travelling around the country to where work could be found, while his mother stayed home to raise the five children.

From his hardworking parents, Ed learned to be responsible for himself and the decisions he made. One of his proudest accomplishments is the fact that he has always taken care of his family, "I've never missed a paycheck, never had to rely on anyone to take care of me or my family." He related to me a story of when he was in the service and he and another soldier were invited to dinner on a cotton plantation in Georgia. "We were served dinner in a beautiful dining room by a maid. We were not supposed to reach for the food to fill our plates. We would nod to the maid and she would place the food onto our plates, stopping only when we indicated. I was very uncomfortable in that situation. I have always done things for myself and I didn't like the idea of someone doing things for me."

Ed always managed to save a little and consequently he is financially stable in his retirement years. Through a combination of social security, pension from the government and wise investments, Ed is still able to provide for himself and his wife.

According to Ed, "aging is a slow, gradual process. You think about things that happened ten years ago, then you realize that it was actually thirty or forty years ago. The older you get, the faster time goes." When asked if this speed bothered him, he replied, "No, that's part of life, you take it as it comes and adjust to it." In every aspect of his life, that is precisely what he has done; changed what he could and accepted and made do with the others.

Like the majority of older Americans, Ed considers his health to be good. Part of this is hereditary, and part of it is taking care of himself. His older brother died at the age of fifty-one of a heart attack, as did his older sister, at the age of sixty-one. Ed firmly believes that their deaths were linked to lifestyles, some avoidable, some not. His father died of heart problems at sixty-nine, while his mother and some aunts and uncles lived well into their nineties. Ed does thirty minutes of calisthenics each morning and walks at least 2 miles each evening. On nice Sunday mornings, he will also walk to church. He stopped smoking when he was in his thirties and drinks only occasionally. His diet is high in vegetables and lean meat, but he does not necessarily avoid desserts. The one thing that has kept him from developing any serious medical problems, he

great

believes, is the fact that he "always took care of any (physical) problems as soon as they came up. I'm not one of those people who ignore things and hope they will go away." Consequently, minor problems which may have developed into more serious complications were dealt with early on. Physically he can still do everything he did when he was younger. Last week he was up on his roof cleaning out the gutters. Some tasks may take a little longer then they used to, only because his endurance isn't what it used to be. And he is cognizant of some inevitable physical declines, such as eyesight. When he and his friend go out in the evening, they rely on "one of the youngsters to drive." The youngsters in this group are in their early sixties.

Ed worked the majority of his adult life for the Internal Revenue Service. After returning from the war, he went to college at night while working full time and raising a family. It took him eight years to get his degree in accounting from St. Louis University. "It was hell to go through at that time," he said, "but well worth it." In the early 1950's, his education opened doors for him that would have remained closed, had he not persisted with it. He was then, and still is, an ardent supporter of the value of continual education, both formal and informal. He maintains active and intellectual mental growth after almost ten years of retirement. He reads the Wall Street Journal, numerous magazines and continues to use the county library system.

When asked about any noticeable memory difficulties as he has aged, he winked and said, "I remember what's worth remembering. Some things have never been worth remembering, so I didn't remember then and I don't remember now." The one point Ed was adamant about was the direct link between physical activity and mental alertness, "If you keep busy physically, it helps keep the mental processes busy." Proof of this can be found in his circle of friends. Those who have remained active physically after retirement, are still alert mentally. He spoke affectionately of one friend, well into his seventies, who restores old cars. His friend cannot seem to find enough hours in the day to work on his avocation. Ed too, remarked that, not only is he not bored in his retirement, rather he, "wishes he had more time to himself to pursue things. It seems like I wake up in the morning and the next thing I know it's time to go to bed." A wife who is also retired, three grown children, two grandchildren, one invalid brother-in-law, two widowed sisters, and various nieces and nephews all vie to share his time these days.

Religion and politics are two other areas where Ed believes there has been no perceptible change as he ages. Religion has not become more or less important to him, and he continues to attend church, partly out of habit and partly to reinforce his beliefs. In the political vein, Ed believes people don't necessarily change their party affiliation, but rather, "you become more of a realist, you don't believe the idealistic words of the politicians. They all want to make changes for the good,

but in reality, what can they do?" Here Ed went on to expound on the premise that the separation of church and state is somewhat of a paradox because all laws are based upon ethical behavior, which relates to moral behavior, which leads to religion, not formalized religion, but just sound moral values.

When the subject of death came up in the conversation, Ed said he thinks about it a little more these days only because realistically it is closer. "When you're young, you think it will never happen to you, but as you age, it becomes more of a reality. You begin to lose family and friends your same age." He is not afraid of death because, as he sees it, "It's a part of life." When asked if there is anything he would like to go back and change, or have the chance to do over again, Ed hesitated for a moment and then quietly spoke these words.

Mistakes are a part of life. If you go back and make one change, who's to say what else would change? Life is a series of chain reactions. One thing leads to many others. If you went back and made one change, the outcome would not just be that one change. So many other things would be affected. Let's leave things as they are."

Upon reflection, Ed considers his life to be a fairly good one. He has affected the outcome of circumstances when he was able, and he has adjusted to those over which he had no control. "Life is meant to be lived." He told me. "You take it as it comes, do the best you can, and you get through it."

My uncle has, I believe, found the optimal prescription for aging well in American society. He has inherited the genetic predisposition for a long life. He has changed factors relating to longevity in his life over which he has control. He has taken care of himself physically, mentally and financially throughout his life and now, in his later years, is continuing to change what he has control over and adapt to what he cannot control.