Living With Integrity Versus Despair - River Journal Online

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There is a great line in the movie "Fried Green Tomatoes." Jessica Tandy plays a woman in her eighties who befriends a woman in midlife, played by Kathy Bates.

The 50-ish woman confesses to the elderly one that she is afraid of death. Jessica Tandy, in true spitfire fashion, responds incredulously, "Death is nothing to be afraid of. I'm at the jumping-off point and I'm not afraid!"

"The jumping-off point." I love that. To reflect back on 80 years, and to have no fears of her own mortality, to have few regrets, to still find joy in life, is what Erik Erikson would have called living with a sense of integrity versus one of despair.

We all know the stereotype of the elderly curmudgeon. We all had one around growing up ("Hey, kids, go play somewhere else!") Thankfully we probably also had an elderly person in the neighborhood who enjoyed the lively sounds of our games and allowed us to play under his windows. When we can look back on our lives with a sense of accomplishment, a sense that we made mistakes, but none we need punish ourselves for, a sense of continuing to grow and live, and a sense of having left something behind, we can march to that jumping-off point with a feeling of integrity. When we look back and feel that we married the wrong person, gave birth to the most ungrateful individuals imaginable, picked the wrong career, lived in the wrong place, perhaps feel alone and isolated, then we reach that point with a sense of despair. We bear the pain of a life misspent.

The screensaver on my laptop creeps across the screen: "Life is not a dress rehearsal." I am not sure where I first heard that, but I have tried to keep it in mind for many years. In college, I had it written on a card over my desk. I have said it many times to patients. And whenever my computer is idle long enough, there it is, to remind me that we only get to do this once and no one gets out alive. Life is a terminal condition, and when it's over, when we are at that point that Ms. Tandy's character was, it would be nice to have a sense of integrity like she did.

One of Erikson's main thrusts, as you have seen by the previous articles on the subject, was that we keep developing and growing throughout life. Unlike Freud, who believed our psyches were set by puberty, Erikson said that we can continue to solve problems, resolve crises, and evolve until the very day of death. While many people do not subscribe to this belief, thus becoming old before their time, there are many who live life to the fullest until they are physically and mentally unable to do so. I knew a woman back in Brooklyn, who was the grandmother of my first babysitter. She lived to be 101. In the last few months of her life her health started to fail, but until that point, well past her 100th birthday, she was donning high heels and classic outfits every Sunday to ride a bus for upwards of thirty minutes to get to the church that she preferred, rather than the one that was a half mile from her home. My former boss, who we THINK might, possibly, maybe, be turning 80 this year (or maybe she already did and she snuck it through without fanfare), still plays tennis, looks stunning, works probably 50-60 hours a week, runs a department of over 20 (much younger) psychologists, keeps up on the latest research, is active in professional organizations, and has a great sense of humor. Whenever I talk to her on
the phone or meet her for lunch I know I have to be on top of my game because she is sure to bring up some philosophical question she has been pondering or some new research she read last week. A few years ago she was challenged by breast cancer. She continued to work, but was upset about the surgery, because her body still looked great, and she felt that to disfigure it was a shame. So, she had simultaneous reconstruction and was able to go right back to wearing her stylish outfits and feeling confident about herself.

Not everyone can still wear high heels and climb onto a city bus at 100, and not everyone can take pride in a body that has maintained its shape and strength at 80, but we need not shrivel up and die after retirement. Certain cognitive changes do happen as we age. We start to lose some brain volume as soon as about 30-35 years old (YIKES!). Our thinking slows down a bit, we are not as good at problem solving and thinking outside the box as we get older. We tend to remember facts we learned years ago, like the state capitols, but we have a harder time learning something new. We start to get forgetful, may find ourselves at a loss for words more often, but the extreme memory loss and cognitive difficulties of dementia are the exception. Arthur Miller kept writing plays well into his twilight years. A colleague of mine, a woman of about 75, recently married a man of almost 90. He sits on several boards, works out at least three times a week, and does consulting work. She only recently retired from a full-time clinical position, but still sees private patients. Early in the summer the couple spent a month in Italy. I recently convinced her to take on a challenging role in our county organization. This is a couple living with a joie de vivre and a sense of integrity.

We all love the idea of someone like Jessica Tandy's character, someone who tells exciting stories of her past, both happy and heart breaking, tries new things, like having her hair tinted purple, enjoys the memory brought back by a taste of a fried green tomato, and takes a younger woman under her wing and gives her an example of how to live her life. Unfortunately, many people look back with regret. No one gets to be 80 years old without at least a few regrets. Heck, no one gets to be 30 without a few regrets. The difference between someone who feels integrity and one who feels despair is how we handle those regrets. There are things we can change and things we can't. We can't go back, like we did in childhood games, and demand a "do over." But we can change things for the future. If we look back and feel that there is nothing we can do about our choices or about the things life threw at us, then there is no hope for getting to that jumping-off point with a sense of integrity, but if we see every challenge as an opportunity, we can exit in style.

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