

How to Be Old

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Credit...Daniel Forero

By Roger Rosenblatt

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Mr. Rosenblatt is the author of “More Rules for Aging,” from which this essay was adapted.

This is a list of rules for the elderly, the aim of which is to keep us elderly, elderly and not to see us go one step further. Staying alive in one's later years is an art generally requiring the avoidance of wrong moves. The key word to a lot of one's behavior is “don't.” If more old people simply did not do certain things, especially on impulse, the world would be a safer place. Duller but safer.

I should add that if you fail to follow these rules, I'm not saying that you are doing anything morally wrong. Only that you will suffer.

1. Run when you hear “We must do this again.”

This is often said at the end of some pointless social event in which you participated reluctantly. Inevitably someone will say cheerily, “We must do this again.” Nonsense. They don't mean it. You don't mean it. Nobody means it.

2. Marry above your station.

Usually you can't help it. But you've probably found that out already.

3. Don't forget to bestow confidence.

It's the best thing you can give someone you love. Saying "You can do it" to a loved one in a situation in which that person has self-doubt — taking an exam, making a speech, writing a poem — means more than any sweet profession of affection. It means that you love that person so wholeheartedly that you wish him or her the inner satisfaction of self-realization. The pride of achieving themselves. What more can you say that so expresses your love?

4. Observe the moth.

In her essay "The Death of the Moth," Virginia Woolf notices a moth in its death throes, batting about a small windowpane. The author watches the animal's plight with pity and admiration — awe, really. Its struggles are beautiful. She imagines the moth saying death was too strong, even for it.

Observe the moth in its monumental fight for life, and do likewise. We gain life's powers by knowing that eventually they will be taken away. There is beauty in this struggle. Murmurations of starlings occur only in the evening.

5. Don't share despair.

Not even with your friends. Not that they won't sympathize. It's just too much to ask of someone dear to you to bear your burdens.

6. Don't compromise, especially a little.

Unless you're a professional negotiator, don't compromise. Give in a little, you might as well give up the ship. During the McCarthy era, students were required to submit loyalty oaths to maintain their scholarships. At a meeting of the Harvard faculty, a professor who had escaped Mussolini's Italy challenged the dean on this matter. The dean responded that signing and sending in the oaths was merely pro forma and had no more meaning than licking the stamps on the letters. The Italian professor stood and said something like, "Mr. Dean, I'm from fascist Italy, and in fascist Italy you learn one thing. First you lick the stamps. Then you lick something else."

7. Screw it up royally.

You've spent a long life telling yourself that mistakes are to be avoided, but that isn't necessarily so. Playing jazz piano, whenever you make a mistake, which is inevitable, you make another mistake deliberately to make something right out of something wrong. Then you do it again. Theoretically, you could play an entire tune of mistakes, and it would sound just fine.

You may think it would be better not to make the mistake in the first place. But a creative mistake may be truer to life, as you've no doubt discovered. You took a job you didn't want, soon to discover it's the ideal job for you. You were born to do that job. When you think of it, life is an assembly of creative mistakes. Even when you don't think of it.

8. Don't question everything you don't understand.

The older you get, the more wonderful the world appears. Wonderful meaning full of wonders. The sudden appearance of something beautiful in the midst of heartbreak, for instance.

You are at a low point, and you think you're going to stay there, there's no relief, when out of the blue, something by Mahler or Beethoven comes into your air, and all at once the sorrow dissipates. You don't question or analyze the moment. You're simply grateful for it.

Where heartbreak is, beauty intrudes. Wondrously.

9. Grab the chicken leg.

So there we were, in our 20s, Ginny and I and a bunch of friends, having a picnic by the Charles River in Cambridge, when I picked up a chicken leg with the intention of eating it and held it aloft. A little boy walked by and took it from my hand and kept walking. My friends and I laughed — the boy was so casual. Ginny said, "He must think that life is a chicken leg, waiting to be snatched." In fact it is, even when you're no longer a spring chicken.

10. Look only at the rim.

When I was playing intramural basketball in college, I was 5-foot-11, a mite in the land of giants, and my all-around game was so-so at best. Yet most of the time I managed to score in the double digits by paying no attention to

the defense. I simply pretended it wasn't there. I looked only at the rim of the basket. And sure enough, most of the time the defense didn't touch me.

Other games in life offer similar opportunities, at any age. Disregard the impediments to your well-being — a noisy neighbor, a treacherous colleague — and concentrate instead on where you are headed. You'll be pleasantly surprised how easily you get there. Nothing but net.

11. Do not seek immortality.

It won't come to you anyway, certainly not through your works and achievements. But the good feeling you have for others, and they for you, that goes on forever. I'm fond of [quoting](#) the poet Philip Larkin: "What will survive of us is love." That should do it.