

Playing Solitaire

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“But I don’t want to see old people all day long,” my mother protested.

At age 88, she was still living in her own home in a Southern California community with large, high-fenced lots hiding all but front gardens manicured by hired gardeners. The people inside the houses emerged from their garage doors each morning encased in their cars and, when they returned, those doors closed automatically behind them. My mother lived in the same house for 35 years, but she knew only one neighbour.

When she was in her early 80s, she drove to a nearby trail where she met a couple of buddies who joined her for a morning walk. Every Friday, they celebrated with breakfast. But by the time she was 86, one had died and the other had moved hundreds of miles away to live in a retirement community near her daughter. My mother stopped walking.

When she was 83, she joined a writing group and began writing her memoirs. But by age 87 her increasing inability to navigate Word was frustrating, so she started using her computer to play solitaire instead.

She was becoming socially isolated so I suggested a day program for seniors. I felt it could serve the dual purpose of getting her out of the house and providing some social stimulation. It seemed clear to me that some shared activities followed by light exercise and a hot lunch would be a good thing.

But No!

“I don’t need a hot lunch,” she replied even though she’d lost 10 pounds since my visit a year earlier. Her main concern, it seemed, was her distaste for a social life organized around other octogenarians. “It’s important,” she proclaimed, “to cultivate younger friends.”

As it happened, my mother had a generation-younger friend who took her to lunch twice a month and a niece who visited once a month, both sitting for hours while my mother rambled on about the good old days. Otherwise, she stayed at home watching TV and playing solitaire. Her meals were a couple of pieces of raisin toast for breakfast, a bowl of yogurt, fruit and cold cereal for lunch, and a half-can of Campbell’s chunky soup for supper, sometimes augmented by the contents of a doggy bag of lunchtime leftovers. No wonder she was losing weight!

I don’t think my mother’s attitude was unique. Only last week, I was listing the virtues of the Greenwoods Eldercare Society’s adult day program to an 86-year-old friend of mine who mostly sits at home alone. She replied, “But I don’t like old people.” I stared at her, not knowing quite

what to say. Then she added, “Well, I guess I’m an old person myself, but I still don’t want to spend my time with them.”

Like my mother, she seemed to see older people as “the other”: menacing folks to be avoided.

Perhaps we’re reaping the results of the ad agency line being sown for half a century or more that old age is an enemy. We’re meant to combat it with their products.

If so, we’ve been at war with our own future selves, a battle we are destined to lose. It may be true that some of us feel younger than our chronological age might suggest, but we’re growing older anyway. I am now 76. If I’m lucky, in ten years’ time I’ll be 86, one of about 750 Salt Spring Islanders who will be at least 85 years of age by then. But I don’t plan to be unhappy about it. Nor will I become a social isolate, hiding out from others my age.

Isolation isn’t good for us. The National Seniors Council (www.seniorscouncil.gc.ca), in its report “The Social Isolation of Seniors,” concludes that too much isolation results in a loss of social skills. It’s also a risk factor for developing a fear of being vulnerable, which in turn can lead to greater isolation. Isolation also contributes to poor health including increased risk for dementia.

To me, the solution is obvious: keep working as long as we’re able; join organizations of like-minded people; volunteer to do good works; help our neighbours. And when we can’t do as much as we used to, we can keep going by doing less or trying something else.

Here are three more ideas for senior socializing: Among other services, SSICS Seniors’ Wellness program (250-537-4607; 129 Hereford Avenue) provides friendly visiting and off island van excursions; the Senior Services Society (250-537-4604; 379 Lower Ganges Road) offers a wide variety of programs and numerous volunteer opportunities; and the Greenwoods Adult Day Program (250-537-5520, ext. 4; 137 Blain Road) operates at Braehaven Tuesday-Thursday and includes a large lunch.

I enjoy an occasional game of solitaire, but it’s not the only game in town.