

Aging in Place Salt Spring Style: How Young Are You?

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I find it relatively easy to clamber into a *Salt Spring Air* float plane. Getting out is another matter. Last time I stepped frontwards down the steps, St. Clair McColl gave me an arm. Feeling stiff, I held on tight. “I guess I’m not as lithe as I once was,” I apologized.

“You’re doing just fine.”

“Maybe for an old lady,” I snapped.

“You don’t look old to me.”

I almost said I’m 74 and feeling unsteady reminds of it. But there were gaping onlookers, so I smiled, thanked him, and marched off with my bags, proud of the fact that I was fit enough to walk home unaided.

A similar encounter took place at a recent Probus meeting. I sat next to Stan Shapiro whom I’ve known since he and his late wife Roberta moved to Salt Spring many moons ago. When I asked how he was doing, he replied, “Pretty good for an old guy.”

What’s going on here? Why are we talking about being old?

Stan says he’s fishing for compliments. “Every time I say I’m 80, people tell me I don’t look it. That feels good.”

Guess what! Every time I say I'm 74, people say I don't look it and that makes me feel good too.

We next wondered whether we should acknowledge that lots of people look younger than we expect. Maybe we should stop basking in our seeming youth and just realize we're in the midst of outmoded stereotypes of how older people look and act.

I asked him whether by mentioning our "oldness" we might be talking ourselves into becoming ancient before our time. Stan says, "No, being aware of our age can keep us youthful longer. Take posture, for example. I consciously try to stand up straight and I exercise with that end in mind."

That's a good idea and so is walking whenever we can instead of driving. Back in 1975, my mother moved to a neighbourhood where she could walk almost everywhere she needed to go. She could, but she didn't. When I suggested she walk the three blocks to her grocery store, her reply was scathing: "In California, we don't walk, we drive!" Her proof? None of the streets in her neighbourhood had sidewalks.

That was almost 40 years ago and I wonder if her words are coming back to haunt her. At age 93, she is in assisted living. They offer a variety of activities, but she spends most of her time sitting in her room. It's both sad and ironic because she used to pride herself on her relative youth. My grandmother lived to be 99 and my great-grandmother lived to be 93. They, too, spent the last 15 or 20 years of their lives sitting alone in their rooms. It looks like I might also be long-lived, but I want to remain active with my friends and neighbours.

In earlier years, I mostly sat at a desk, my only exercise being those assigned by a physiotherapist to ease my aching back. I'd do them until I could move around again and then I would stop. To me, exercise was for rehabilitation, not for every day. And if anyone had suggested I do it on a regular basis, I would have said I didn't have the time.

My sedentary life style left me unfit. Any wrong move could result in muscle spasms so painful I couldn't walk. By the summer of 1998, just turning over in bed was excruciating. A rheumatologist diagnosed fibromyalgia. I could have rolled up into a ball and given up on life, but I decided to get fit instead. At North End Fitness Monday morning January 4, 1999, I hauled myself upstairs—hand over hand—and said, “Help.”

On my feet again, a friend suggested I join a fitness group because the social side of exercise might keep me motivated. When my caregiving duties meant I could no longer keep to a regular schedule, I joined Curves, followed by Friends' Fitness. Later still, I joined Pump Primers. After fifteen years of regular exercise, I'm in better shape than when I was a teenager.

How about you? Are you exercising regularly? Salt Spring is blessed with an abundance of exercise opportunities and there's little excuse for not trying them out. Regular exercise will keep our bodies in shape, our immune systems working, and will help sharpen our brains.

We won't be forever young, but who knows? One of these days I just might be able to skip down those float plane steps right into the waiting arms of St. Clair McColl.