

Playing the Hand We're Dealt

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by Helen Hinchliff

“I don't want to grow old. . .” he confided.

“Guess what!” I cut in, recklessly presenting myself once again as some sort of know-it-all.

“We're *all* going to. . .”

“Unless we're unlucky,” he said, recapturing his train of thought.

John and I were schmoozing over glasses of wine at an ArtSpring reception recently and he wanted to tell me that he and his wife had been entertaining some younger relatives they hadn't seen in a long time. “And they look about ten years older than we do,” he announced, building up to his punch line: “The main difference is we exercise and they don't.”

All of which brings me, strange as it might seem, to some lessons I've been learning this summer while learning to play bridge, a sedentary exercise if there ever was one!

Anyway, my first lesson has been that we have to play the hand we're dealt. My tendency has always been to try to fix things. To somehow make them better! But in bridge, unlike games that involve discarding while hoping for better cards, bridge requires us to accept the hand we've been dealt. To win we must bid and play wisely. We can't rail against the cards or pretend that either we (or our partner) have cards that aren't really there.

I haven't played bridge since I was a kid making a fourth whenever my mother's parents came for a visit. My father claimed he didn't have time for silly card games. But I think the real reason he didn't play is that he couldn't control his emotions when he was powerless to turn a weak hand into a stellar one.

Over the years, friends have suggested I join them for an afternoon or evening of bridge. “I don't play bridge,” I'd reply. Why not? I hate to admit it, but I probably have more than a touch of my father's fear of not being in charge. But now that I'm learning to play the game, I'm starting to accept my lack of control over what life dishes out. I just have to try my best with the cards I've been dealt.

You might be wondering what drew me into this new pastime. The reason becomes my second lesson. A friend called one afternoon begging me to play. “Dorothy,” I replied. “You know I don’t play bridge.”

Bridge is a partnership. You cannot play by yourself and Dorothy was so desperate for a partner that evening that I finally said. “If you’re willing to accept someone who hasn’t played in 60 years, I’ll try.”

She was willing, the others accepted me, and I enjoyed the evening. It wasn’t long before I was learning another challenging lesson: to be successful in bridge, you and your partner are a team. His or her cards are every bit as important as yours are. As we bid, we have to listen to each other offering hints about what cards we each hold and we have to make use of each other’s cards to win a game or to try to keep our opponents from winning.

I’ve mostly led a life of self-reliance, hating to depend on anyone else for anything. But lately I’m coming to realize that whereas a degree of self-reliance is essential in life, it’s better to feel the comfort and support of others, especially as we grow older and are less able to fend for ourselves, than to go it alone.

So what kind of hand have we been dealt in the game of life and how well are we playing it? We are an island population that is substantially older than average and some of the services we have relied on aren’t in the cards anymore. But there’s always a new hand to be dealt.

The Salt Spring Seniors Services Society (250-537-4604) is offering a range of new programs this autumn; Better at Home (250-537-4607; <http://saltspringcommunityservices.ca/seniors-wellness/better-at-home/>) and Hospice (250-537-2770; <http://saltspringhospice.org>) are sharing offices on Hereford Avenue right across the street from the new Salt Spring Wellness Centre (1-250-900-1125; <http://ssiwellness.com>); and, for one afternoon next week, Isobel Mackenzie, the new B.C. Seniors Advocate (1-877-952-3181; www.seniorsadvocatebc.ca), will be the star attraction at a town hall meeting to be held at the Lions Club, Tuesday, September 15 from 1 to 3 p.m.

She will describe the role of the Seniors Advocate and listen to you and your family talk about what is working—or not working—for seniors on Salt Spring Island. Whether it’s home care, access to services, housing issues, or the increasing number of cases of caregiver burnout, we need to tell her what cards we’ve been dealt, ask her for support in how we play them, and to remember there’s always hope for a better hand.