

Aging with Grace



Christopher News Notes

AGING IS INEVITABLE. Although the advertisements that bombard us for one more anti-wrinkle potion or plastic surgery procedure promise to give us access to the elusive fountain of youth, growing old doesn't have to be a negative thing. Age, after all, does have its benefits. Lots of them.

In many cultures, older adults are seen as wise sages who can offer advice and guidance because they have experienced so much and can speak from the hard lessons they've learned.

We may not be able to turn the entire American culture around to that point of view any time soon, but we can start right here, right now with a change in our own perspective.

Whether you are an adult already inching toward “old” in society’s book or a younger person looking forward to middle age and beyond, you probably have some firmly planted ideas about aging. Do you see it as limiting due to physical changes, or freeing due to fewer responsibilities? Are you excited by the opportunities aging can provide, or fearful of the unknown? In order to age with grace, we have to begin from a place of acceptance. If we face aging with fear, we are operating from a disadvantage right off the bat, because at least half of aging with grace is centered in our heart, mind and soul—even if the body doesn’t always want to cooperate.

Stop Acting Your Age!

Sister Madonna Buder, 88, is known as the “Iron Nun” because she has competed in dozens of Iron Man competitions and hundreds of triathlons, even as an octogenarian. In a 2019 essay in *America* magazine, she remembered being asked what it felt like to get old:

“As I approach 90, I am less concerned with outward appearances—things like what I wear, how my hair looks, what others think of me—and more concerned with my inner life and how I relate to the world around me. Much of this mindset comes from my dedication to running, which I was introduced to when I was 47 years old by a priest who declared that the sport was a great way to harmonize mind, body and soul,” she wrote. “From my running to my injuries, I have learned that there are many benefits to aging...By far the greatest is the wealth of wisdom acquired through years of experience that can be shared. In European and Asian cultures, seniors are revered. By contrast, in the United States, we are not taught to value the gifts older citizens can provide.”

Sister Madonna says that when people ask for

Age Is Just a Number

You may feel like a kid inside, but maybe you can see the gray hairs and feel the creaking knees. So how do you keep a youthful perspective when the physical part of you is showing signs of wear and tear? Here are a few tips for aging with grace:

- **Continue to learn.** Don’t be afraid to be a beginner. Take up that hobby you put off when you were too busy, sign up for a class in something that piques your interest, ask a friend to teach you something they know but you don’t.
- **Keep physically active, to the best of your ability.** Maybe you can still run marathons, maybe you’re confined to a comfortable chair most of the time. Whatever the case, find a way to move and stay active, even if that’s through simple arm exercises. Check with your doctor for what would work best for your current physical condition.
- **Interact with younger people regularly.** If you’re lucky enough to have children and grandchildren who visit with you, soak it up as often as you can. Share stories and photos and memories. If you don’t have grandchildren or don’t live close enough for visits, look for volunteer opportunities at your local school, parish, or library. Chances are, organizations will be thrilled to have an older adult who wants to share his or her experience with young people, or maybe just read a story to the littlest ones.
- **Find joy in the simple things.**
- **Be grateful.** If you haven’t tried a gratitude journal, start one now. Every day, write down three things for which you are thankful. It can be something big, like a trip somewhere special, or something basic, like the smell of coffee brewing in the morning. When we’re busy saying, “Thank you,” we don’t have time to complain.

advice on how to deal with aging, she tells them to remember themselves as a child “skipping along without a care in the world.” Her second instruction? Never stop being that child. She adds: “I can still remember my mother more than once asking me, ‘Darling, can’t you act your age?’ At this point in my life, I am glad the answer was no.”

For 40 years, Ernie Anastos has been one of New York’s most respected and beloved news anchors. He anchors *Fox 5 News* every night and has earned more than 30 Emmy awards and nominations. But when he looks at the great lessons in his life, it comes down to something simple and sweet. His grandfather had a wonderful collection of books, many of them on Greek philosophers. One unknown philosopher’s quote left an impression on a young Ernie and became his daily mantra: “I have

a wish to die young, but as late in life as possible.”

During an interview on *Christopher Closeup*, Ernie said, “I loved it when I first heard that and read it...This is what the spirit is about. To feel like you have new things to go out and learn and grow and build and develop and to expand. It’s the spirit and the affirmation of life. It’s wanting to make sure that you never feel bored. That you always realize the magic and the newness and the freshness and the creation that we have in front of us, to be able to explore and to become everything that we possibly could be, and to learn from others.”

In other words, you may be aging on the outside, but if you keep your heart and mind young in spirit, you will end up with the very best of both worlds: the enthusiasm of youth coupled with the wisdom of age.

Just Getting Warmed Up

For some, aging brings with it the opportunity to give back. In the case of Barney C. Jones of Roysse City, Texas, that's the ultimate understatement. Barney, 82, spends every day of his retirement volunteering in every way he can to help seniors in his community. Whether it's driving someone to a doctor's appointment or being a daily chauffeur to those who can't get to the senior center on their own, he's ready, complete with a shiny bolo tie and white and black spats.

During a recent taping of the Christopher Award-winning Facebook series *Returning the Favor*, host Mike Rowe visited Roysse City specifically to honor Barney for being a "champion of the elderly" who said that his purpose in life is "to try to be missed when I'm gone." It seems he's already succeeded, even though he doesn't appear to be going anywhere just yet. "He has done everything for us," says a woman at the senior center with tears in her eyes. "That's why I call him an angel." Barney puts it simply: "You only get one chance at this life, so make it count while you're here."

That same can-do altruistic spirit is evident at the Stoneridge Creek senior living community in East Bay, California, where residents who are former teachers or engineers volunteer to tutor employees who are immigrants and want to strengthen their reading and speaking skills. Jule Saracco, 83, is a retired teacher and resident who volunteers as a private tutor to a woman who has been in the United States for 25 years and working at

Stoneridge for three years. Saracco told *The Mercury News*, "It's a win-win situation because we're helping them, but they're also helping us."

When he died at age 90, Jean Vanier was described by *The New York Times* as a "Savior of People on the Margins" for his groundbreaking work founding L'Arche, an international group of communities for people with developmental disabilities. He was also an author and philosopher with powerful insights on God and life. From his viewpoint, "old age is the most precious time of life, the one nearest eternity."

"There are two ways of growing old," he said. "There are old people who are anxious and bitter, living in the past and illusion, who criticize everything that goes on around them...They are shut away in their sadness and loneliness, shriveled up in themselves," he said. "But there are also old people with a child's heart, who have used their freedom from function and responsibility to find a new youth. They have the wonder of a child, but the wisdom of maturity as well."

And that seems to be the key to aging with grace: embracing "what is" with joy, gratitude, and acceptance. Yes, you're getting older, but that doesn't mean you are "less than." Learn to see the value in who you are today, the things you know, the experiences that have shaped you, and recognize that the world needs your insights, your wisdom, and your participation.


**"It's better to light one candle
than to curse the darkness."**

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"Companion on the Road of Life, no matter how long or short the distance of the journey, you stay by my side. Thank you for your encouragement when the road is challenging and the view ahead is hazy. I can walk with hope in my heart, knowing you are with me whether the way is hilly or straight, rough or smooth, blocked or open to easy access. I walk with your compassion, a love that comforts and strengthens me with every step I take."

—From "Prayers of Boundless Compassion"
by Joyce Rupp