Get excited...because you’re just now old enough!

Connie Mason Michaelis

This is a very personal story and one that changed my life view forever, maybe it can change yours! It started on the morning of my 65th birthday. I have always been an industrious woman, raising children, having a fulfilling volunteer life and successful career, but on that day, I was struggling. I was having a quiet time, as I usually do each morning, and was feeling a little morose. After all, it was a BIG birthday, and I was thinking about time, or I should say the lack of time, to do all the things I had dreamed of. The back story is that I always believed I would accomplish a significant achievement in my life, maybe invent something to save lives, share a powerful message on a worldwide stage, or write a bestselling book. I called it my ‘rich and famous’ dream! Well, up to that day, it had not come to pass. I must say I was having a bit of a pity party and no one was attending but me.

And then the thought came… It was a divine inspiration, and I know it did not originate inside me. The inaudible voice said, “Connie, you are just now old enough!” I was completely taken back. “Really? At 65, I am just now old enough to do my best work?” It was such a commanding thought, I hopped out of bed and was bursting with energy and excitement about my birthday but more importantly, the future. This timeless word of encouragement could apply to anyone, at any age. Every morning you are just old enough to face that day. You have the right amount of experience and wisdom to bring to the tasks at hand. My 95-year-old mother’s daily prayer was, “Lord if you don’t take me home today, I’m here and ready to do your will.” The point is you are never too old! As a mother of experience and wisdom to bring to the tasks at hand. My 95-year-old mother’s daily prayer was, “Lord if you don’t take me home today, I’m here and ready to do your will.” The point is you are never too old! As a mother of experience and wisdom to bring to the tasks at hand.

Who Reads the Newspaper?

There are so many wonderful things about the newspaper. Not only does it deliver the daily local and national news, but it informs us of the weekly grocery store sales items. We can get the TV guide and a weather forecast. We can read about candidates for local elections and keep up with the city and county commissions, and of course the pot holes! And the obituaries… where else are you going to see a page dedicated to folks you might know? There is always a sigh of relief that you’re not on the page! We look to see the ages and as long as they are older than we are, we assume it was their time.

Papers are a unique medium in the news business and can’t be easily replicated by TV, radio or online news operations. When we watch the news on TV we are distracted by the anchor man or woman, what they are wearing… or not. Getting your news on the computer is a 24-hour opportunity. It is difficult or even impossible to go back the next day to read an article again. What if your granddaughter’s star volleyball team is pictured? You can’t even cut it out! When vacationing I’ve been forced to read the paper on my phone. Don’t even get me started. Spreading the screen to get the font big enough to read is a real nuisance and it just seems like the world is smaller on the phone. A national emergency is the size of a deck of cards!

And then there is the touch and feel of newsprint. Even the smell of opening the paper, especially if it was soggy. Many a day there was when the paper was laid out to dry after a rain. I have no idea when they started putting the paper in little blue bags. It brings back memories of my dad getting home from work and picking up the paper off the porch. At that time the Arkansas City Daily Traveler was delivered in the afternoon. I have no idea why, but maybe publishers knew that the Junior High paper boys could only deliver after school. Right up there at the top of reasons we love newspapers is that they are so useful. You can start a fire, cover garden plants, use as mulch or kill weeds. You can wrap a treasure to store away, or even wrap a gift in the comics. How many papers end up in the bottom of a bird cage or kitty litter box? And what the heck would you shred for a confetti parade without newspaper? In addition the paper can be recycled and unlike books you don’t feel the least bit guilty! There are a few good things about the good old days and newspapers are one. I give you permission to use this newspaper for any of those reasons and enjoy. You can even throw it away!!! Who reads the paper? Older and wiser folks do!

About the Author and Publisher

Connie Mason Michaelis is an enthusiastic advocate for Seniors and successful aging. With years of work in sales and marketing including hospice, durable medical equipment and retirement living, Connie has become a knowledgeable problem solver for the complex issues of life transitions. As a weekly newspaper columnist Connie has become known as an expert in the field and speaks and writes to encourage and support her audience. She works directly with Baby Boomers, Seniors, their families, and with companies that serve them: retirement communities, healthcare organizations, and all age-related industries. Through storytelling and humor Connie challenges her audience to embrace the necessary changes to prepare for the best chapters of life and live to the fullest. Changing paradigms, planning for a future and preparing for all circumstances can lead to a life of peace, happiness and satisfaction. Connie can be found at www.justnowoldenough.com and on Facebook at Just Now Old Enough. All articles are penned by Connie.
Ram Dass, an American spiritual teacher, said, “Make friends with change.” He made this statement after surviving a life-threatening stroke that left him paralyzed and unable to speak. With years of therapy, he regained some speech but is still wheelchair bound. He views his stroke as an act of grace that deepened his understanding of life and the purpose of suffering. With his grateful attitude and a glimpse of deeper understanding, he advises that we might as well open our arms to change. Aging is just one long stream of changes. Those that seem to navigate old age best become experts at adjusting, improvising, embracing the new freedoms and new limitations that are a part of the journey. Rather than fighting against change, we can open the door to creative new thoughts and new possibilities.

I had a very wise mentor in my life that said you can either be a stick or a string. If you’re a stick, you are always pushing back. A rigid attitude means that you can only accept a limited number of options. There are times when being stubborn is beneficial, but usually it is because we refuse new facts and conditions. Barry Sternlicht, an American billionaire says, “As the facts change, change your thesis. Don’t be a stubborn mule.” When you’re a string, you’re flexible. You can be very creative with a string, and it will serve many purposes. But the stick can only be a stick, and if you try to make it bend, it breaks. Embracing change is about being a string and making adjustments as we go. It is difficult to plan for major changes - a devastating illness, loss of a loved one - but we can practice being flexible with the small changes in our lives.

Make Friends with Change
Connie Mason Michaelis

Plan For A Future
Connie Mason Michaelis

Everyone talks about planning for the future. Financial advisors, funeral home directors, health and life insurance companies are in the business of helping you plan. Physicians will predict your future health status based on your current physical indicators. If your A1C keeps going up, you’re headed towards diabetes. The hope is to tie up all the possible contingencies and create the most secure future possible. Actuary tables can predict for the masses, but there is no such thing as a certainty for an individual, so we educate ourselves about the odds and act accordingly. So much future planning for seniors is based on negative outcomes. Everyone is playing odds with the future trying to avoid some kind of calamity. As they say in sports, we start playing not to lose instead of playing to win!

Another type of planning is much more significant. Preparing for the future is dramatically different than preparing for a future - what a difference a little word makes!

With years of experience working with the Senior population, I see it over and over. Seniors quit preparing for the next chapter of life. They just stop thinking that there is a future and consequently they are on automatic pilot. All of our lives we plan for a future. We plan to go to school, to go to work, to get married, to have children and grandchildren. We plan to retire, and when that happens, often the planning stops. We slide into this phase of maintenance and hedging our bets against calamity without really thinking about it. Abraham Lincoln said, “The best way to predict your future is to create it.” Continuing to plan a future, looking for ways to keep growing, and playing to win are critical issues that we all face. My favorite mantra is, “You don’t quit dreaming because you’re old, you’re old when you quit dreaming.”

An article by Lauran Neergaard, AP Medical Writer, described a new designation for those Seniors over 80 that have amazing memories. They are now called SuperAgers. I love the title and will adopt it going forward. She says, “It’s pretty extraordinary for people in their 80s and 90s to keep the same sharp memory as someone several decades younger, and now scientists are pecking into the brains of these SuperAgers to uncover their secret.” The work is the flip side of the disappointing hunt for new drugs to fight or prevent Alzheimer's disease. Neuroscientist Emily Rogalski who leads the SuperAging study at Northwestern University in Chicago, believes we should figure out what we can do to maximize our memory as we age. It is accepted scientific fact that parts of our brains shrink as we age, even if we avoid diseases like Alzheimer’s. But these SuperAgers defy the norm and actually have more nerve cells in the deep brain region that are important for focus and retention of information.

Who are these SuperAgers? After a battery of tests only 5% of the 1000 initial participants, 80 or older, were designated. The key memory challenge: Listen to 15 unrelated words and be able to recall at least nine of them a half hour later. That's the norm for 50 -year-olds, but the average 80-year-old recalls only five. “It doesn’t mean you are smarter,” reports one participant who is 87 years old. The genetic theory was refuted because his own father developed Alzheimer’s in his 50s. He offered his theory which was the fact that he keeps busy, bikes, swims, and plays tennis. And he maintains a very busy social schedule with friends. Instead of focusing on what we might be losing, let’s turn our attention to SuperAging! Staying active both physically and mentally are the key ingredients! Sitting alone in front of a TV set is the antitheses. Living in an environment where friends and activities are in close proximity is essential. I leave you with 15 unrelated words: house, dog, apple, newspaper, child, grass, sun, ocean, moon, banana, tree, computer, book, teeth, golf. See you in 30 minutes!

Some words of wisdom from Chip Conley’s book, Wisdom @ Work, Making of The Modern Elder, “Imagine yourself at age one hundred looking back on you life right now. Imagine you’re blessed with 20/20 vision for the last couple of decades of your life. You can see the forks in the road and the choices you’ve made. In hindsight, it may seem obvious where you should have explored a little more, when you might have said a wholehearted yes to that path that scared you.”

I challenge you!
The Prison of Ribbons

I worked with Betty for thirteen months. She thought she was ready to make a move, so she gave us a call. Before her husband passed away they had moved to a maintenance free duplex, but she had it full of collectibles that she continued to buy. Doll collections, carnival glass, angels, nativity sets and everything else you could imagine. The basement was wall to wall shelves filled with her various collectibles. She loved to crochet and she had collected boxes of yarn. Betty was having health problems and could no longer go up and down the stairs to enjoy her cherished possessions. What a dilemma! All the things she loved were there and she knew that she would not be able to move them all to a new home.

Her children were understandably divided in their opinions of what was best. Some wanted to hire care in her home and multiple cleaning people to keep up with the collections, but it was terribly expensive. Others wanted her to sell everything and move on. I loved that they were so respectful of her desire to make her own decision. When she decided to contact an estate sale expert she was horrified that her collections did not have the value that she assumed. Most of the items were not worth what she had paid for them. It was a devastating predicament! We would talk weekly on the phone and I listened patiently while she contemplated her situation. The only thing I suggested was that she consider the risks of taking care of her collectibles or the risks of taking care of herself, it would be her choice. As of this writing, Betty is still at home.

What was once a source of joy has become a serious burden, a prison of ribbons. She is an inspiration to me to realize the difficulty in moving on in life and finding joy in new things.

The Homestead

One of my favorite stories from my years in marketing to Seniors began when I met Elaine. She was 85 when we first met and she had lived in the same house all her life. She was born at home in the house that was homesteaded by her grandparents. When she got married, the newlyweds moved into the home with her parents and lived together until the elders passed. Elaine and her husband raised four sons and two daughters in that same house. They farmed and raised cattle and the homestead provided for most of their needs with gardens, dairy cows and chickens. I met Elaine when she made the decision to move away from the homestead. None of her children or grandchildren wanted to live there and she had recently been widowed.

Between the overwhelming maintenance and loneliness, she knew it was time. Can you imagine the decades of memories and the accumulation of paraphernalia collected by four generations of family? It was all there in the house, the basement, the attic, the barn, and the multiple machinery buildings. But Elaine understood that she could homestead a new life that would take her forward in an environment of comfort, safety and dozens of new friends.

She brought a few very fine antiques that had a life span of more than 150 years. She brought pictures and special collectibles. But her wisdom was that the material things were not important for her new life, it was the presence of love from her beautiful family that had created the homestead, not the buildings and furnishings. She laughed when she told me her family spent more time with her because there were no more chores to do! Elaine is an inspiration to all of us to let go of the past and plan on a future that allows us to be free.

The Challenge of Downsizing

The statement, “If you are going through hell, keep going,” is attributed to Winston Churchill. There is some debate about who originated the quote, but Churchill said a similar statement, “Never, never, never give up.” The very moment we are in the midst of a struggle is the exact time to do everything within our power to move forward one step at a time. What person is there that does not go through difficult challenges?

One of my favorite books is The Road Less Traveled by M. Scott Peck, MD. Peck says in the first chapter, “Life is difficult. It is a great truth because once we truly see and accept this truth, we transcend it.” Peck gently encourages readers to move through the hard and often painful process of change. The goal is to keep moving toward a higher level of life experience. Another way to say that is, “Don’t get stuck!”

Recently my husband and I decided to downsize from 3000 square feet to half that. I’m practicing what I preach! As we age, we need to be aware of our tendency to retreat from change, but change is the indicator of life. Tasks that at one time were totally manageable become overwhelming. All I have to do is have a day with my grandchildren to realize the difficulty in moving on in life and finding joy in new things.

Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.”
— Leo Tolstoy

“Be the change that you wish to see in the world.”
— Mahatma Gandhi

“Grief does not change you, Hazel. It reveals you.”
— John Green, in The Fault in Our Stars

“The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking.”
— Albert Einstein

“Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Don’t resist them; that only creates sorrow. Let reality be reality. Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like.”
— Lao Tzu
Liberation from Stuff
Connie Mason Michaelis
Over my professional career I have had the privilege of working with thousands of Seniors in transition that are paralyzed by years of collected “stuff.” It is like the weight of the world is holding them down. The overwhelming task of clearing out their home keeps them from moving forward. We spend a lifetime buying and collecting things to fill our lives with happiness, beauty and comfort; then later we have to get rid of it. We get stymied with years of accumulation and inheritance. It is literally a prison of ribbons. It may be beautiful or meaningful to possess, but it also is suffocating with a weight of responsibility. I am not talking about the hoarding phenomena that we hear about on the news. I’m talking about a lifetime of collected “stuff” that ordinary people like you and I have. What in heaven’s name do you do with your great grandmother’s 150-year-old hope chest, when no one in the family wants it? What about a 50-year collection of dolls? “Stuff” is one of the biggest issues that seniors face.

I’ve been in conversations with Seniors that are begging for a solution. The only advice I can give is what my sisters and I did for our mom. I’m not saying it is easy, but it takes an entire family effort to spend time together going through things. The bottom line is; family will go through it with their parents now or without them later. The first choice is the best one. We laughed, cried and argued our way through boxes and boxes! In the end, Mom had all of her favorite things and the rest was taken care of. The relief for all of us was tangible and Mom felt like she participated in passing on her legacy. If there is not family available, there is an entire industry emerging today of companies that do this work. It still takes the initiative of the individual to make the phone call and start the process. Think of it as liberation from “stuff!”

More About Stuff
Connie Mason Michaelis
In my previous articles, the topic of Stuff was directed to seniors moving into retirement living. I’ve addressed the overwhelming task of downsizing and dispersing years of collected “stuff.” This column is dedicated to all the baby boomers. I’m including myself! Our population group will be the largest number of seniors in history. Not only are there lots of us, but we are more affluent and have more disposable income than any population in history. What does that mean? For one thing, we’ll probably collect more stuff! One of these days, we’re going to have to dispose of it. Our parent’s generation derived their values out of the depression, so material possessions were extremely rare and important. The boomer generation exploded with economic prosperity and value bigger, better and more. In addition, we live in a world where everything has become disposable. More than ever before, we’ll have mountains of stuff to deal with.

My sister helped me downsize my home. Interestingly this is my older sister. I should be helping her, right? Dee has always been good about getting rid of things that were no longer relevant. Her home is beautiful and could be featured in Architectural Digest. Her drawers are always neat and well organized. She inherited all the genes for great housekeeping. As we were working in the house, she told me to remember three rules.

1. If it is beautiful, keep it. (a painting)
2. If it is meaningful, keep it. (a love letter)
3. If it is valuable, keep it.* (sterling silver)

Then I have three decisions about those thing I am getting rid of.

1. Give it away to someone specific that will enjoy it. (family, friends)
2. Donate it to charity. (pick your favorite, they may come get it)
3. Throw it away. (put a big trash bag in every room)

I also worked with a wonderful lady that did tag sales. She came to my house and priced everything that I wasn’t taking or giving away. She sold for three days. Then she took care of distributing the things that did not sell. I walked out of an empty house (with a nice check) and said my goodbyes. It was hard but it was also completely liberating. I was ready for the future and believe me, my children thanked me!

*Do you really know if it is valuable? Read the story The Prison of ribbons!

According to the AARP, 10,000 baby boomers are reaching retirement age every day and will continue into the 2030s.

One Cardboard Box
Connie Mason Michaelis
My mother was 95 years old when she passed away. She was a beautiful lady with a tremendous faith. If she could have written a script for her own passing, it could not have ended more beautifully. My sisters and I were with her and it was very peaceful. But the real story was in her journey of the last 10 years before her passing. She made the decision (not easily and not without encouragement) to move out of her home. My mom also was very strong willed and it was not an easy decision to leave her home. But finally she saw the wisdom of moving to a community where she would have a daily social life and she could leave the maintenance on her home to a new owner. My sisters and I went through the tremendous job of cleaning, sorting, packing, moving, donating, and giving away. She moved to a darling little independent living apartment in a retirement community. We made a nest for her with all of her treasures and none of the junk. She lived vibrantly, without the burden of home ownership for those last years. She was safe, secure and had the support of family, friends, and staff. When mom stepped into glory, we celebrated her life in grand style. Because of mother’s willingness and all of our hard work, we had 600 sq feet of precious treasures to distribute. I came home with a cardboard box of memories. We had already done the hard work and at the end we could focus on her wonderful life and each other. Food for thought!

My mom, Iyla Mason, at 90 years old.
My Story
I have a BS in Biology and a Secondary Teaching degree from the University of Kansas. I have four children and 11 grandchildren. When I married Pat Michaelis in 2000 I was blessed with two additional adult children and 4 more grandchildren for a total of 15 grandkids! As a part of my career journey I became a Mary Kay consultant/director and drove seven pink Cadillacs. In my early fifties I made a dramatic career change to Hospice Care education and marketing. After that followed Durable Medical Equipment and Senior Living. I retired in 2016 and started my Lifestyle Consulting business which focuses on the transitions of Seniors. My expertise comes from years of working with Seniors and their loved ones. I’ve met with over 7000 families. Each family is unique but there are universal issues that most people deal with. Over the years I have become a problem solver par excellence. It is my passion to use all of those experiences and the wisdom I’ve gleaned from those families to help others.

Along the journey I began to write a newspaper column for the Topeka Capital Journal. It started as an advertising piece but today it is freelance journalism. I’ve written over 500 articles focused on Seniors and the challenges they face.

On my bucket list I have a book to write, but I thought it might be more fun and interesting to write and publish a newspaper. After all newspaper articles are my forte! This Challenger is volume 1. I hope you enjoy. And as the article on page one says, you can put it in the bottom of a bird cage when you’ve read it!

Filial Piety Connie Mason Michaelis

Are you familiar with the term filial piety?

A life defining moment happened to me many years ago. I accidently ended up in a college classroom where I heard a Chinese woman presenting her doctoral thesis comparing 5,000 advertisements, both print and television, to see differences in the depiction of seniors in the US and China. She looked for ten criteria: vitality, health, activity, etc. The last criteria was filial (fi-lē-sī) piety. She explained that in China there is a well-accepted virtue that children honor and respect their parents, especially the older they get. That virtue is filial piety. ‘Filial’ means family and ‘piety’ entails devotion.

As an example, she pulled out a magazine showing an old man in a wheelchair with his beaming son standing next to him. The son is admonishing others to buy this superior brand of wheelchair. The presenter said there were very few representations of older Americans in a state of weakness. American ads showed seniors dancing, swimming, playing tennis as targets for things like cholesterol and ED medications. No one appears old except for a little grey hair. ‘Filial piety’ is a term worth embracing and promoting! Our culture suffers from ageism, and we are diminished because of it. I knew at that moment it defined everything I felt deep inside. Now I had a word for it, ‘filial piety’ the practice of honoring and respecting our Elders!

This is the Chinese symbol for “Filial Piety.” The top portion is the symbol for parents and the bottom symbol is for child. The curve, or cradle between creates the symbol of a child supporting the parent.

Take the challenge, Connie

Part of the journey was sharing the stage with Dr Bill Thomas, author of Second Wind: Navigating the Passage to a Slower, Deeper, and More Connected Life

The journey includes 15 grandchildren, this is just 10 of them and my four adult children on the 4th of July 2018. It still amazes me!
The Obituary Page

He Died Peacefully
Connie Mason Michaelis

Do you read obituaries? I’m obsessed with them. It makes no difference if I know the person or not, I am just intrigued with what is written to capture another’s life. Obituaries are very expensive, so brevity is a financial must. For example, The New York Times charges $263 for the first four lines and then $52 per line after that, with about 28 characters per line. That would amount to the first three sentences of this blog! There are some unique patterns that I have observed after reading hundreds of them, probably thousands. Very frequently the author says that the deceased died peacefully at home, and/or they died peacefully surrounded by family. It paints a lovely image that brings comfort to the family and to those reading the obit. Having worked in hospice care for years, our goal was always what we called the “good death,” which was indeed a peaceful passing. This phrase is almost exclusively written about the elderly and never about children or young people. It just doesn’t seem to apply.

Death is a hard topic to write about and to read about, although it is the one thing we all have in common. I do believe that the loved ones left grieving cling to those final images and want others to know that very personal piece of the story. But my “aha moment” was this: wouldn’t it be powerful to read that someone “lived in peace!!” Honestly, we have very little control over our final passing, but we have total power over our living! That thought has moved me to think about the beauty of living peacefully with myself and with others. In a world of conflict, living in peace should be our daily goal. Then perhaps the living and dying will be the same. Each of our journeys has an ending, and we never know the end of the story, but we can purpose to make the journey more peaceful. What a beautiful and brief obituary, “She lived in peace!” Remember you are just now old enough to make choices that will help you to live in peace.

Eulogy Vs. Resume
Connie Mason Michaelis

I’m not sure when I started reading the obituary page but I don’t miss a day, although I always wince when it is someone close to my age or younger. Some would say it is morbid, but honestly, there is nothing better than an inspiring epitaph. I especially remember newspaper columnist, Naomi Peterson’s, obit with so many accolades concerning her education, illustrious career, talents and then a single sentence that was a shocker. “She was a former member of Sam’s Club.” I read it over and over and finally realized, she got the last laugh! Another great obituary was written for a gentleman stating that he died on the 17th hole of the golf course after scoring a birdie. The obituary goes on to say that his sons loaded him on their golf cart to finish the 18th hole before going back to the clubhouse! At some point, you realize it is a hoax. It turns out that he had written it himself as the perfect exit, but of course, it didn’t happen that way.

I like to think of a eulogy as a continuing resume. We can anticipate every new chapter of life and expect that we will continue to experience new things, become more interesting and maybe more light-hearted. Death is not losing; it is the universal closure to this earth experience. Knowing that it is our common bond, we should encourage each other to embrace every chapter of its fullest. What could the last years, months and days of your life bring? Perhaps you will make your greatest statement yet! Maybe you’ll mentor and inspire a young person. Possibly you’ll bring hope to a total stranger. The finest eulogies depict characteristics like kindness, love, generosity, wisdom, forgiveness and yes, humor. There is always time to add to your life resume with those qualities. Remember you are building your resume every day!

A movie recommendation:

If you haven’t seen the movie The Last Word, it’s worth your time. The movie depicts the story of a successful businesswoman, Harriet Lauler played by Shirley MacLaine, who engages a young, local newspaper reporter to write her obituary before she dies. In one of their many lively dialogues, she gives a piece of advice to the aspiring journalist: “You don’t make mistakes. Mistakes make you.” That is the perspective and wisdom of an older person! As my husband says about this time of life, it’s like pulling toilet paper off the roll - years seem to go faster and faster. So, I leave you with a thought for this coming year from the same movie. Don’t aspire to 365 nice days... have days that matter, days that are true and days that mean something. Be kind to yourself, be generous to others, and be adaptable.

I wake up every morning at nine and grab for the morning paper. Then I look at the obituary page. If my name is not on it, I get up.

Benjamin Franklin
Happy-well Part I

Have you been hearing about the Harvard Study on aging recently? It is back in the news and on the talk show circuit. It originated in 1937 to follow the aging process of 237 Harvard students (males in their sophomore year). Later, disadvantaged youths from inner-city Boston were added and then women. Creating diversity in the study enlarged the scope.

George Vaillant, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and director of the study for the past 35 years, set out to determine the factors that resulted in ‘happy-well’ or ‘sad-sick’ Elders. The participants that are alive today are in their 80’s and 90’s. The seven key indicators were: education, alcohol abuse, smoking, marriage stability, exercise, weight, and coping mechanisms.

Recent interpretation has put the spotlight on relationship stability as a factor that may well outweigh the traditional markers like smoking, obesity and exercise. The newest analysis of the data says that our ability to nurture and be nurtured is invaluable. The human connection aspect is not about being an extrovert or have 300 friends on Facebook, it is about deep and genuine interpersonal relationships. This is true of great marriages and great friendships. It seems as you grow older that the happy-well people have become pros at engaging other humans at a deeper level. The sad-sick have withdrawn into themselves and not only have limited interactions but more superficial relationships. A simple lesson from the Harvard Study is to worry less about cholesterol and more about friendship, gratitude and love. Living in community allows the continued social interaction that is key to good mental, emotional and physical health. Living alone or without human interaction is sad.

Happy-well Part II

Can you imagine reading a full-page ad in the newspaper saying that a major scientific discovery has been made that will extend healthy living by 10 to 15 years? For a mere $19.95 the ‘secret remedy’ is yours. When the package arrives the instructions simply say to reconnect with as many friends as possible and start making a concerted effort to create more genuine relationships. Would you demand a refund? The Harvard Study on aging would indicate that a simple thing like making friendships is better than the best medicine that science has to offer. Now, this requires more than jumping on Facebook and sending friend requests. This means developing deep personal interactive relationships that are based on love, gratitude, and forgiveness. One of the issues of growing older is some of your closest relationships have passed, and if you are somewhat isolated, it may be difficult to cultivate new friends.

George Vaillant, director of the Harvard Study, says, “This is more than caring for others, lots of healthcare professionals have dysfunctional lives, though they are able to care for others. What’s critical is allowing yourself to love others, and being able to take people in—as I’ve got you under my skin.”

In a personal encounter, do you come away feeling awkward and uncomfortable or appreciative and grateful? Developing deep relationships is time consuming and rewarding work. A simple lesson from the study is to worry less about cholesterol and more about gratitude and love. In the best case, according to Vaillant, an ever-widening social radius of human connection allows older people to be among the happy-well group.

One of the steps that may improve those odds is living in community.

Happy-well or Sad-Sick, The Harvard Study Final Thoughts Connie Mason Michaelis

Indulge me with one more personal editorial on the Harvard Study on aging. The head of the study George Vaillant, although trained as a psychoanalyst, bluntly declares that "Freud vastly overestimated the importance of childhood." After reading many articles on the study it was clear that a great deal of emphasis was put on the importance of discovering whether the subjects considered their childhood experience as being among the ‘cherished’ or ‘loveless’. Fact after fact was based firmly on the premise that cherished children were successful in almost all categories. There was a clear connection between success and a happy childhood. But the greatest surprise (and perhaps not a surprise at all) was that in older age, the happy-well elders had some of the best marriages and great relationships. This is true of people who are able to reconnect with as many friends as possible and start making a concerted effort to create more genuine relationships. A simple lesson from the Harvard Study is to worry less about cholesterol and more about friendship, gratitude, and love. Living in community allows the continued social interaction that is key to good mental, emotional and physical health. Living alone or without human interaction is sad.

One of the subject members named Godfrey Camille, at 19 was an intractable and unhappy hypochondriac. The predictors of his future were his “lack of an emotional life” and a tendency toward ‘loveless’. Fact after fact was based firmly on the premise that cherished children were successful in almost all categories. There was a clear connection between success and a happy childhood. But the greatest surprise (and perhaps not a surprise at all) was that in older age, the happy-well elders had some of the best marriages and great relationships. This is true of people who are able to reconnect with as many friends as possible and start making a concerted effort to create more genuine relationships. A simple lesson from the Harvard Study is to worry less about cholesterol and more about friendship, gratitude, and love. Living in community allows the continued social interaction that is key to good mental, emotional and physical health. Living alone or without human interaction is sad.

The Harvard Study of Adult Development at the Harvard University Health Service is also known as the Grant Study which originated with 268 physically- and mentally-healthy Harvard college sophomores from the classes of 1939–1944. The study has prospectively charted the lives of 724 men and women for over 60 years. Most recently, in current literature, has been nicknamed the Harvard Happiness Study.

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"Love is a fruit in season at all times, and within reach of every hand.” — Mother Theresa

One of the greatest diseases is to be nobody to anybody.” — Mother Teresa
Some of my favorite columns over the years...

**The U Curve of Happiness**

Connie Mason Michaelis

When was the happiest time of your life? Was it in your teenage years? Or maybe it was while raising your children. Or is it possibly right now? Perhaps it helps to define happiness as a sense of freedom and/or contentment as opposed to feeling stressed and overburdened. Dr. Laura Carstensen, founding director of the Stanford Center on Longevity discovered that people in their seventies are often happier and more content with life than those in their fifties, forties, or even thirties. Our long-term happiness diagram may look like a U curve.

Most of us would agree that as children our lives were for the most part carefree and fun. Life was so good that we didn’t want to take naps or go to bed early. We were high on the chart of energy and enthusiasm! But as we move through those development years and into our 20’s and 30’s, we face the stumbling blocks of responsibility, family, and finances. We are constrained by our duties, and there seems to be no time for the fun of our youth. The graph line dips down significantly. By the time we reach our 50’s, we’ve arrived at the bottom of the happiness curve. This is the classic time for a midlife crisis. Without a clear perspective that life can again return to happiness, new sports cars and younger women are desperate efforts to get on the upside of happiness.

Research is telling us that happiness blooms again in later years. We’ve slayed the dragons and reprioritized our lives. We are more confident and courageous and, yes, we’ve developed a sense of humor. We still feel young inside (old is always 15 years older than we are), but we don’t have to bear the burdens of midlife. So, we can go about in our masquerade of wrinkles, smiling at the younger generations with a larger perspective on life. We have arrived again at the top of the U-curve!

**Dedicated to Stan**

Connie Mason Michaelis

Stanley and Pat are new friends. They winter in Arizona, and we’ve become acquainted in our neighborhood. Stan, at 93, and Pat are undeniably inspirational. Stan is an accomplished businessman who combined his interest in music to build and operate a well known Supper Club, La Chan-sonett, in New York City in the 60’s. His first wife, Rita Dimitri, who passed away in 1997, was a multilingual vocalist and ebullient spirit who gained popularity in Europe and joined Stanley in the US as his wife, and premier performer. Stanley became her accompanist in the intimate supper club. Today, Stanley and Pat are the epitome of superagers who continue to live active, vibrant lives and inspire many others.

My ‘Dedication to Stan’ story is based on a poignant lesson he taught me. He told me he had a rough time a year ago with a health issue which involved a lengthy hospital stay and many doctor visits. He admitted that he almost did not make it. The fact is he is not only survived this catastrophic health event but is recovering magnificently. Here comes the punch line. One of his doctors told him that he should not ask for so much improvement because after all, “You’ve lived a good life!” Stanley did not take that well, he said, and I quote, “Bullsh*t! Don’t write me off because you think I should be grateful that I’ve already had a good life!” Lesson learned…our life is not like a commodity that is limited because we’ve used up our allotment of good days. It is not like we’re dishing out ice-cream, and the container is empty, and you don’t get any more. He reminded me that the expression, “You’ve had a good life” is not a switch to turn off the future. He utterly rejected the doctor’s words and is actively pursuing more of the good stuff: more exercise, more travel, more friends, more daily piano playing, and yes more ice cream!! Thank you, Stanley, for helping me understand the power of words, and we can always pursue more of the good life!

**The Aging Placebo**

Connie Mason Michaelis

Placebo comes from the Latin word meaning “I shall please.” It is a substance with no active therapeutic effect. A placebo is given to a person in order to deceive them into thinking that it is an active treatment. In drug testing, a placebo can be made to resemble an active medication so that it functions as a control; it is to prevent the recipient from knowing whether a treatment is active or inactive. This psychological phenomenon, in which the recipient perceives an improvement in condition due to personal expectations, rather than the treatment itself, is known as the placebo effect. The placebo effect points to the importance of perception and the brain’s role in physical health.

There is research going on now to understand the connection between successful aging and mental attitude. The phrase, “You’re only as old as you think you are,” holds deep implications. There are entire cultures where individuals regularly live to be 100 years old, and among those people, there is a universal expectation that humans live a long and active life. Research is finding more commonality between mental attitudes of these cultures than their diet, climate or environment. What if your future was more reliant on your mental attitude than all the other factors including genetics? Americans are so dependent on the medical community to cure our ailments, we do not consider our own personal power to promote vitality. We actually believe that age brings illness and incapacity! There is a great deal of power in mentally preparing to age.

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