

Thirty Thousand Days

A JOURNAL FOR PURPOSEFUL LIVING

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Constructive Living

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Challenging Children

Living Fully with
Illness

Getting Things Done



Learning for Life

TRUDY BOYLE

Not long ago an acquaintance and I were discussing the art of aging gracefully or living well at any age. She told me that her biggest fear was that she might become like her mother. Although I didn't say so at the time, I thought how my fear would be that I might not become like mine.

What is it that is so admirable about my mother? She is not wealthy nor famous, hasn't written a book, nor run a marathon and her name won't be included in the book of "who's who." Yet, my mother is an inspiration to me and many other people.

Just one of the many reasons her family admires her is due to the practice she began on her 65th birthday, which was to learn something new every year. For example, at the age of seventy-five she announced that she would learn to swim. Considering she had nearly drowned as a child and been terrified of water ever since, we were obviously surprised.

It took persistence and effort for mom to learn how to swim. Almost two years went by, before she started to have any ease in the pool. Tempted to give up many times, she kept splashing along because what she discovered is that

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even while swimming unskillfully she felt better, looked better and had more energy. We had fun in those early days as she kept track of the laps and converted them into kilometers. I once asked her at what point she had lost her fear of the water. “I haven’t lost it,” she said. “I’m still afraid of the water but I have discovered I can swim anyway.”

As she kept track of the distance she swam, she translated it into a goal of swimming the distance to the next town. Then we would meet in that town for lunch to celebrate as she achieved her goal. As time went on she gave up those goals and swam for the sake of swimming. Now, for the past three years, my friend and I join her early in the morning, three times a week, to swim laps at the local aquatic centre. We make sure to show up since, rain or shine, my 84 year-old Mother is waiting for us as we walk off the ferry — car warmed up, and ready to go.

When my stepbrother died suddenly from cancer the year that she turned 80, it was painful for us all. Mother found her own way to cope with the terrible loss that year — by picking up a brush for the first time and begin-

ning watercolor lessons. She painted her way through sorrow and into the light. Because she practiced, did the assignments, and read the books, she learned how to paint. Now my sister and I and all the grandchildren have original watercolors on our walls.



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She painted place cards for the table for all fourteen of us — spring flowers for Easter and winter scenes for Christmas. Of course, she gave me a few extras for unexpected guests. As my artist friend says, “all of her paintings and sketches contain something that most amateur art does not — spirit, generosity and attention to detail.”

In her 70’s, when many of her friends turned over the programming of electronic equipment to their grandchildren — things like VCR’s, movie cameras, televisions — she got out the directions and learned to do things herself. From filming and editing movies of trips with her husband, to taping TV programs she might be interested in later, she simply took the time to learn how to operate equipment.

When her husband’s eyes deteriorated with the onset of macular degeneration, she suddenly found herself in the position of being the head driver at age 77. For twenty five years, she had



Francisco de Goya (1746-1828), the Spanish master artist is a “teacher” from another era from whom we can learn much. Goya was known for his self-portraits. At age 80, he painted one of his most famous works and entitled it *Aun Aprendo*. Goya, even though he was old and suffering from his kyphosis (the hump on his back probably caused by Tuberculosis of the spine) and arthritis, was inventing a new technology for his field. In 1826, he was the first to do lithographs — signed and numbered copies of a limited edition. The English translation of *Aun Aprendo* from the old Spanish means “I am still learning.”

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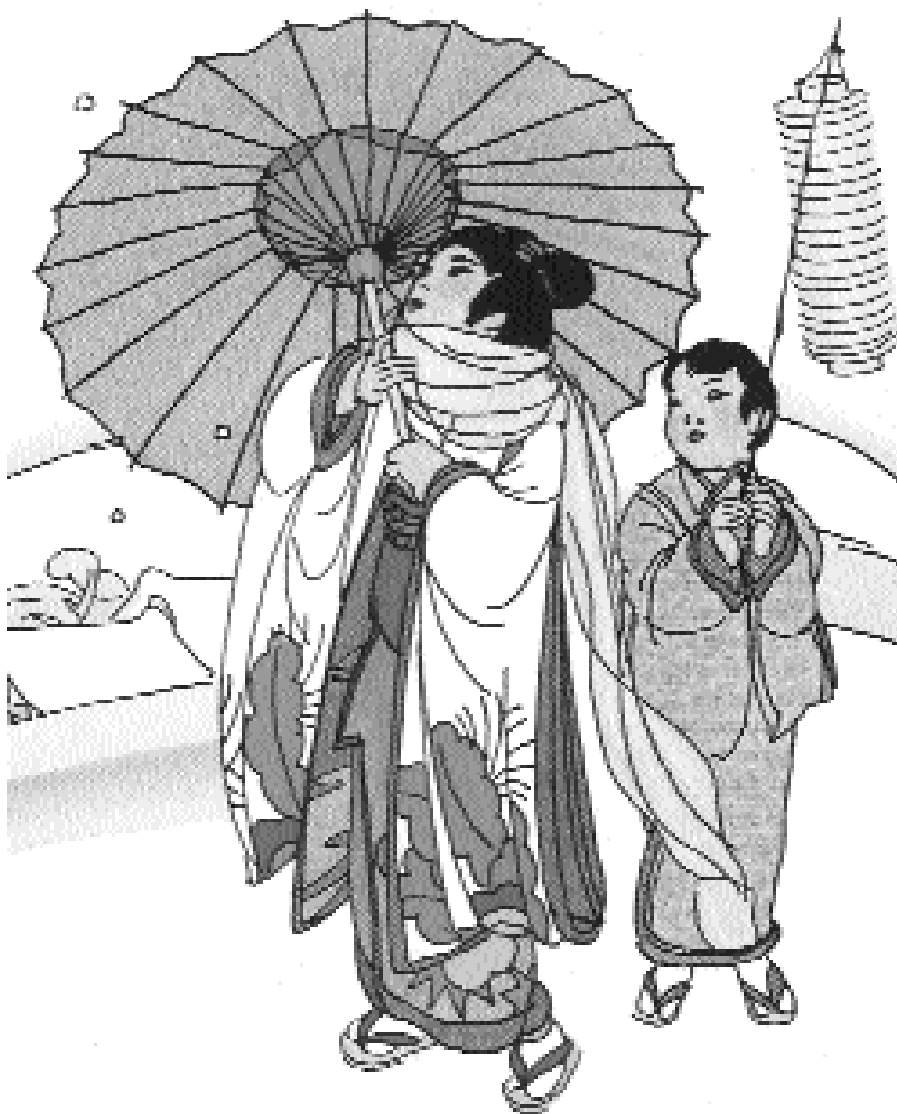
been the passenger when they drove together. Driving meant more than going to the store or to the doctor's office. Now it meant helping with the drive to Arizona and back, where she and my stepfather spent the four months of winter. Once again, she demonstrated her ongoing ability to stay open to learning new things.

Whether it is putting up the Christmas lights on her balcony, doing her taxes, or travelling across the continent to see her sick brother — she simply sees what needs doing and if she can do it she does, and if not, she gets the help she needs. Learning and

being realistic is part of who she is.

Being a beginner is always difficult and is made no easier when you are 80. We all seem to want to be smarter, more talented and a bit more clever than we really are. But what she has come to see is that you don't know what you can do until you've done it. "Paint, swim, use a movie camera — why I have no idea how," she used to say. After learning and practicing she looks at her work and thinks, "who did that?"

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The Keys to Retirement

There are four basic activities that make retirement rewarding.

First, retirees should **replace their work mates with another social network** . . . grandchildren often work spectacularly well.

Second, retirees must **rediscover how to play**. Competitive play — social bridge, cribbage, shuffleboard — lets one make new friends. Play provides a wonderful magic that is especially suited to retirement, for play permits a person to maintain self-esteem while giving up self-importance. And play makes retirement fun.

The third basic activity is creativity. **Creativity** requires protected time — even solitude; and thus, while raising a family and earning a living, creativity is not always possible. In retirement, however, creativity, like play, should be the primary goal.

Fourth, retirees should **continue lifelong learning**. The challenge in retirement is to combine the fruits of maturity with the recovery of childlike wonder.

*(Adapted from **Aging Well** by George Vaillant, M.D. - Little, Brown and Co. 2002 - and based on the **Harvard Study of Adult Development**.)*

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Learning was not exercised by my mother through some kind of discipline and will power, although to a degree they were present in the beginning. Her approach to learning was more about curiosity and wonder, with a good measure of perseverance added to the mix. Let's see how it goes. What happens next? "Isn't this exciting when you mix this color with that one. And look at how you make snow?"

This year it is rug hooking, along with more classes in watercolor, not to mention the peripheral pleasure and joy that comes from all this creativity and learning. "Look at the way

the shadow falls on the mountain," she points out to me, "and do you see the colors in that butterfly's wing?"

It's never too late to learn. I see people's faces light up in surprise when they hear that my mother learned to swim at age 75, or when they look at the first watercolor she did at 80. "Maybe it's not too late for me," they exclaim. They see that she is just an ordinary woman, but with an extraordinary talent for living and learning and loving. (that's another story)

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Dancing Through Fear

For decades I had been telling myself, and others, "I can't dance." Then a wedding invitation arrived with the warning, "Get ready to dance all night!" The words left me cold, because I could not dance. An honest re-wording was, "I won't dance, because I'm afraid of looking foolish."

I told my wife I was going to seek out some instruction. To my pleasant surprise, Debbie said she would join me. Driving to our first dance class, my palms sweated with the certainty that I would be the class klutz, a certainty that Debbie later told me she shared (about herself, not me!). But entering the building, we did not set off the "no-rhythm" alarm. Inside we found perhaps twenty people of all ages, most of them looking a bit nervous. All of us had managed to get there despite our fears. Ten minutes later the instructor had us all laughing at our beginning efforts. We had a blast!

At the wedding, we did dance all night. We are dancing still. Fear will always be somewhere on your life's dance floor. The sooner you learn to dance with it, the better . . .

*Chuck Landrey
Old Saybrook, CT*

Suzuki Roshi and the Shovel

"Once everybody at Tassajara took some tools and climbed a long hot dusty mountain trail to work on some project. When they reached the top of the mountain they discovered that they had forgotten the shovel and began discussion about who should return and get it. After the discussion had ended they realized that Roshi wasn't there. He was already half-way down the mountain trail, on his way back to pick up the shovel."

*As told on the official website of **Crooked Cucumber: The Life and Times of Shunryu Suzuki** by David Chadwick*



Teahouse Practice

Teahouse practice means that you don't explicitly talk about Zen. It refers to leading your life as if you were an old woman who has a teahouse on the side of the road. Nobody knows why they like to go there, they just feel good drinking her tea. She's not known as a Buddhist teacher, she doesn't say, "This is the Zen teahouse." All she does is simply serve tea — but still, her decades of attentiveness are part of the way she does it. No one knows about her faithful attention to the practice, it's just there, in the serving of the tea and the way she cleans the counters and washes the cups.

Excerpted from an interview with the poet Jane Hirschfield, and Bill Moyers.