

AGING GRACEFULLY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

By: Sharon Gardner

I will be 69 years old in October, and therefore have been struggling to “age gracefully in the 21st century”, for about 9 years now. I have rather severe osteoarthritis, so I must admit I was feeling very “old” and very “feeble” when the doctor told me in 2004 that I would have to have four joints replaced, both hips and both knees in the next several years, meaning not only four surgeries, but months and months of physical therapy and rehabilitation.

My first inclination that day was to go home, pull the covers over my head, and give up. My husband wouldn't let me do that (of course, I needed to cook—ho ho) and pretty much told me that I had to “get a grip on” and that we would get through this together. I also called my best friend, Kay, who pretty much told me the same thing. In the 5 years that followed, I have had two of the four surgeries I will someday need. And, thanks to my social network of family and friends, who refused to let me drown in “self pity”, I have had quite a full and adventuresome life. Kay is a person who lives life to the fullest—and always has. When I was still on crutches after my first surgery (hip replacement), she talked me into going to Colorado on a trip, which was the best thing I could have done for my self-image, as I found out that even on crutches, I could ride the Silverton Train and take a tour down into a mine, and stay in a “haunted” hotel known for its sightings of the beautiful woman who once lived there (sorry to say, we never sighted her). After my knee replacement, I have relied somewhat on a cane to help my balance but my husband, Kay and I have made several trips to Vegas where we saw the America's Most Talented winner for last year Terry Fator, Charlie Daniels Band, and others. I have also ridden in an old-fashioned horse and carriage in Clarkston, where Kay then lived, and gone to Red Hat Society parties with her. I have 7 beautiful “great grandchildren” ages 1-1/2 years to 7, and they are the “light of my life”—my 7 special angels. The oldest one, and the one who was around me most in recovering from surgeries, took great pride in “hepping Gigi walk”! So, I made an effort to take the kids to the park, to Thanksgiving Point and to Tracy Aviary whenever I could. I have always been quite interested in volunteer work, and I volunteered at the local hospital as a gift shop cashier. It has been so fun—seeing families buy gifts for new babies, and poignant—seeing the caring faces of people buying gifts and flowers to cheer up those on the floors. We also attended our “Fiftieth Class Reunion” in Twin Falls, Idaho, where I realized a lot of people were in worse shape than I was. And we had a ball! I wasn't able to play golf with the gang like I used to do, but found that visiting and reliving “old times” was a lot more relaxing and less frustrating anyway!

I retired from a career as a Legal Assistant and was somewhat familiar with computers, and have always loved to play games and so I “hit the keys” during recuperation from surgeries also, to play pinochle, canasta, and scrabble. I met several people online after my first surgery from the Midwest and Eastern US that I still value as friends today. We played hundreds of pinochle, canasta and dominoes games as we visited away on line. One of these friends, Rick, was a younger senior that was disabled with neurological problems, but was a “whiz” at pinochle. He once bared his soul to me, stating that the relationships he had formed on line playing games were the things that kept him going some days.

I wasn't so full of self-pity as I once was because of my activities, but there were days that I also thanked the Lord for my online friends that were as close as my computer. I still have my bad days when it is going to rain or when I overdo, but I try to keep my mind clear and my attitude right. My dear husband tells me at those times, “Tomorrow will be a better day!”

I guess it comes down to this—a lot of aging gracefully comes back to “attitude”. Find things you can do, keep as active as you can, cherish your family, appreciate your old friends, and make as many new friends as possible.