

## Some Lessons For Living From The Older Generations

The Guardian recently ran a piece written by 94-year-old Harry Smith. Smith waxed poetic on his description of what growing old has meant to him:

*People should not look at their approaching golden years with dread or apprehension but as perhaps one of the most significant stages in their development as a human being, even during these turbulent times. For me, old age has been a renaissance despite the tragedies of losing my beloved wife and son. It's why the greatest error anyone can make is to assume that, because an elderly person is in a wheelchair or speaks with quiet deliberation, they have nothing important to contribute to society. It is equally important to not say to yourself if you are in the bloom of youth: "I'd rather be dead than live like that." As long as there is sentience and an ability to be loved and show love, there is purpose to existence.*

*All of you, when young, will make your own history: you will struggle, you will betray some and others will betray you. You will love and lose love. You will feel profound joy and deep sorrow and during all of this you will grow as an individual. That's why it is your duty when you get old to tell the young about your odyssey across the vast ocean of your life. It is why when death does come for me – even if it mauls me with decrepitude before it takes me – I will not lament either my old age or my faded youth. They were just different times of the day when I stood in the sun and felt the warmth of life.*

After reading Smith's piece I was reminded of the book [30 Lessons For Living: Tried and True Advice from the Wisest Americans](#). It's been a few years since I read it but the ideas have stuck with me. Professor Karl Pillemer interviewed thousands of people over the age of 65 to glean some wisdom on all sorts of life lessons on things from kids to careers to marriage, money and much more. I found my notes on the book and really liked his passage on what this group *didn't* say about their experiences:

*No one – not a single person out of a thousand – said that to be happy you should try to work as hard as you can to make money to buy the things you want.*

*No one – not a single person – said it's important to be at least as wealthy as the people around you, and if you have more than they do it's real success.*

*No one – not a single person – said you should choose your work based on your desired future earning power.*

*Now it may sound absurdly obvious worded this way. But this is in fact how many people operate on a day-to-day basis. The experts did not say these things; indeed almost no one said anything remotely like them. Instead they consistently urged finding a way of earning enough to live on without condemning yourself to a job you dislike.*

These ideas do seem obvious but it's not easy to think this way when others around you put so much value on money or material possessions.

Everyone has regrets about things they wish they would have done differently if given the opportunity to go back and do things over again. Pillemer listed five things he learned from this group about regret reduction that can be applied to young people:

- **Always be honest.** *Avoid acts of dishonesty, both big and small. Most people suffer from serious regret later in life if they have been less than "fair and square."*
- **Say yes to opportunities.** *When offered a new opportunity or challenge, you are much less likely to regret saying yes and more likely to regret turning it down.*
- **Travel more.** *Travel while you can, sacrificing other things if necessary to do so. Most people look back on their travel adventures (big and small) as highlights of their lives and regret not having traveled more.*
- **Choose a mate with extreme care.** *The key is not to rush the decision, taking all the time needed to get to know the prospective partner and to determine your compatibility over the long-term.*
- **Say it now.** *People wind up saying the sad words "it might have been" by failing to express themselves before it's too late. Don't believe the "ghost whisperers" – the only time you can share your deepest feelings is while people are still alive.*

One of the best ways to plan ahead for the future, financial or otherwise, is to ask people who are older than you what they wish they would have done at your age to better prepare for what's to come. Looking back on it now, what do you wish you would have done differently in your 20s, 30s, 40s, etc? I'm still relatively young but my short list includes things like saving for retirement at an earlier age, avoiding negative friendships, taking a few more career risks early on, not wasting my time on the last three seasons of *Shameless* and not stressing about things that were out of my control.

Some of the other timeless advice I've received over the years includes the following: time is more important than money, autonomy at work is highly underrated as is being nice to people, almost everything in life is a tradeoff, you have to have balance and splurge every once and a while, quit worrying so much about the past and the future at all times and try to enjoy the present.

It can be difficult to think this way in the heat of the moment. I know that's true for me. But these types of lessons and wisdom provide a nice reminder to put things into perspective.

Sources:

[Don't Dread Old Age \(Guardian\)](#)

[30 Lessons For Living](#)

Further Reading:

[The Jeff Bezos Regret Minimization Framework](#)