

How To Grow Older Without Growing Old

by Serge Kahili King

When I was in my late twenties and working in Africa I thought I was in good shape. Besides being an ex-Marine I got plenty of exercise by trekking jungles and deserts and paddling crocodile-infested rivers just as well as my African companions. Then one day I was invited to visit the forests of The Gambia, a small former British colony, to evaluate a community development project for possible funding through my organization.

The man in charge of the project turned out to be an eighty-year-old Dutchman, white-haired and wiry with an iron grip. He asked me if I would be up to a trek into the deep forest and I smiled. No problem at all, I told him.

Well, that was one of the most difficult treks I had ever been on. The man didn't walk through the forest--he ran. Speeding down almost invisible trails, leaping over logs and streams, he set a pace that totally wore me out. It was a great project and I funded it, and as a bonus I learned how to take a bath with a cup of water, but the most important thing I learned was that "age is not a measure of decrepitude."

Conventional thinking, strongly supported by the medical profession and the drug industry, accepts the idea that the body is like a machine: it will inevitably break down as it gets old. And the best you can do when it gets old is to repair it as best you can and pump it full of drugs to ease the inevitable pain and slow down the deterioration with more drugs or, sometimes, by replacing the parts.

The fact is, bodies do break down. Repairs are sometimes needed. Drugs can help to ease pain and speed up recovery from illness. Replacing parts may be necessary. But this is true at any age: infancy, adolescence, adulthood, and elderhood.

What does happen as we grow older is that our bodies change. There's no getting around that. The most significant change is in how we look. This happens to everything as it grows older. Full-grown dogs don't look like puppies. Mature koa trees don't look anything like they did as saplings--even their leaves change radically. Rocks change, mountains change, stars change.

Humans change in lots of ways. Teeth fall out and mostly come back. Baby fat disappears to be replaced by regular fat or muscle. Bones lengthen, skin stretches, organs modify their behavior, and so on and so on.

We are all going to die sooner or later, but there is nothing in the cosmic record that says that we MUST fall apart, get weaker and weaker, or sicker and sicker, just because we are older. If we do, it's only wisdom to do something about it. But there is nothing inherent in our physical make-up that says it MUST happen.

We are all growing older, but do we have to grow old? A dictionary definition of "old" says that it refers to "having the characteristics or showing the signs of age, as in marble now so old that it has turned gray and chipped." Chipped? Since when did marble have to be chipped to be considered old? Since when did humans have to be weak and sickly just because they have reached a certain age?

How can we grow older without growing old, in the sense of deteriorating? Here are some things from the philosophy of Huna that I have used and learned at seventy-six that may be of help (I'm now eighty-eight and healthy as I publish this):

The world is what you think it is, and the world is not what you think it is. You can change your world by changing your thinking. If you think you have to look and feel old when you are older, you will act old and feel old and have all the bad things you think will have to happen when you *are* older.

There are no limits and there are limits, so you can change your experience by changing your rules. What rules? Those rules you call beliefs about what it means to be a certain age. Consider all the things that people say about getting or being old, and what you believe about getting or being old, and redefine them all as just made-up rules. And then consider what kinds of rules you would rather have and practice using them as your guidelines instead.

Energy flows where attention goes and attention goes where energy flows, so you can change your experience by changing your focus. What focus? Experiments have shown that when older people are placed in an environment that replicates the music and surroundings and activities of their youth their physiology tends to acquire youthful, more healthy characteristics. You can create that same experience with your mind, using focused memory and/or imagination and you will notice the difference.

Now is the moment of power and all moments are now, so you can change your experience by changing your feelings. What feelings? Your feelings about the past, present, and future. As we grow older we tend to build up stress without realizing it. Our breathing tends to get more shallow and we tend to get dehydrated, which leads to aches and pains and emotional depression that has nothing to do with aging. The fastest way to feel better is to hydrate and breath more deeply.

To love is to be happy with someone or something, and to love is to help someone or something. You can change your world by increasing love. How? The thing that makes you grow old (and unhappy) more than anything else is criticism, both of others and of yourself. Reduce your criticisms and increase your appreciations as much as you can and you'll feel younger no matter what your age is. And the more you help others--not from duty or obligation, but from the heart--the better you will feel and the sharper you will be as well.

All power comes from within, and everything has power. You can change your world by increasing your power. What power? Your self confidence and your physical strength. Self doubt and helplessness will weaken your mind, so learn how to build up your confidence in yourself. Laziness and poor eating habits will weaken your body, so do some form of exercise and eat well to strengthen it. In another experiment, 30-year-old men and 60-year-old men competed in six weeks of strength training, and the older guys won--and looked good, too.

Effectiveness is the measure of truth, and the measure of effectiveness is experience. You can change your world by becoming a healer. What kind of healer? Any kind. Perhaps you can heal relationships in your family. Or become a healer of furniture, plants or animals. Or learn some kind of alternative healing technique to help other people. The thing is, when combined with compassion, healing heals.