



KICK UP YOUR HEELS . . . BEFORE YOU'RE TOO SHORT TO WEAR THEM

How to Live a Long, Healthy, Juicy Life



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Chapter One

A Good Pair of Heels Needs Good Soles

*“When it’s over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.”*
— from “When Death Comes,” by Mary Oliver

When I reached my 60th birthday, I panicked at the thought that I had less time ahead of me than I had behind me. Of course, that could be debated by those who are seeing from the rear. On a brighter note, this realization enhanced my need to discover as much as I could about the aging process—both the negative and positive. I’m fortunate to have had grandparents who lived long lives, and a mother who’s now 96. If genetics are on my side, then I’m in luck.

Like most people, I never really understood or believed that I’d actually reach the same place my mother was many years ago. Not that I would want the alternative, which is not to be here at all. But when she’d try to tell me how she felt about getting older, I dismissed her by saying, “Oh, you have plenty of time.” She’d counter with, “You’ll see.” Well, she was right. I *am* seeing, and it’s quite a ride! Bette Davis was right on the money when she said that “old age is not for sissies.” I’ve become a great admirer of my mother’s resiliency and all of the other individuals who’ve become prototypes for my own journey. I’ll mention more of these inspirational people throughout the book.

As my mother’s body began to betray her by becoming frail, her humor would continue to sustain her. She’d remind me that she had the “furniture disease.” When I asked what that was, she quipped, “That’s when your chest falls into your drawers.” Well, much of what she said is true: Our minds and bodies change, and if we’re around long enough, our lives become a roller-coaster ride. If we’re lucky, the highs are greater than the lows. But like any ride, we know that someday it will end.

The good news about aging in the 21st century is that many gains have been made in the area of longevity and quality of life. We have a greater understanding of what ages the body and how we influence that process. Not long ago, it was thought that genetics was the primary factor in determining how long we lived and the quality of life we could expect; however, we now know that genes alone aren’t something to bank on, especially if we’ve managed to make more withdrawals than deposits into our life-expectancy account. How we live our lives mentally, physically, and spiritually means much more than we ever imagined.

It seems ludicrous that most people don’t think about this until they’re quite old or have been diagnosed with some type of physical or mental ailment. In order to have the greatest impact on how we live our later years, we need to think about this much sooner. Unfortunately, most of us are invested in believing we’re immortal when we’re young, and getting old is the farthest thing from our minds. But it’s important to remember that regardless of how long we’ve waited, it’s never too late to start aging well. The body/mind has incredible abilities to repair and restore itself.

With this book, I hope to engage you in the process of living not only longer, but also wiser, healthier, happier, more enthusiastically, and juicer. I love the word *juicy*. I made it part of the book's subtitle because I think it's one of the clearest metaphors for getting through life: When life loses its juice, we begin to wither and dry up. Children are inherently juicy. No one needs to force them to play, laugh, delight in the ordinary, or to be curious or authentic. Kids haven't yet learned to judge, hold grudges, or hang on to anger. And for them, eating is a necessity but not a main focus for their attention, and no one has to prod them into moving their bodies. Unfortunately, as life becomes more involved, sorrow, disappointment, and the constant messages to grow up and be responsible take over our psyches. We lose the succulence of youth in exchange for some of the withering ways of adulthood, and some of us become terminally serious.

I remember going to the market with my grandmother and watching how she always had to squeeze the fruit, insisting that it was the only way to tell if it was ripe with flavor and juice. If it felt hard or scaly, she'd throw it back. Don't we all love biting into a piece of fruit that spurts and squirts and may even spritz juice on those around us? Our lives should be like that. Yes, we have our days or weeks or even years of struggle and strain, but if we can incorporate the tools that I suggest throughout this book, we'll have better skills to navigate the bumps and lumps along the way.

Some of these techniques will be familiar to you, and others will be new. I also hope to reinforce the things you already do that enhance your life. But whether these "juicy tidbits" are just being introduced to you now or you currently use them in your life, the information and skills will be most useful if—like mastering a musical instrument—you simply practice, practice, practice.

Our whole lives have been a practice of one sort or the other—good and bad. Why not leave a legacy for our friends and family of a life well lived?

*"And in the end, it's not the years in your life that count.
It's the life in your years."
— Abraham Lincoln*

Our greatest assets and strengths in our quest for longevity is our ability to adapt to what's going on with our bodies and our lives. Not being able to change is the death knell of a youthful spirit. Some people are hell-bent on staying the same, and if you suggest something that's different from their usual agenda, they often respond with, "That's not who I am." Well, to those people I say, "Why not put a coffin in your living room to practice being dead, since you're almost there anyway!" In order to thrive and survive, we must become change agents. We also need to increase our spiritual path by learning to forgive the past, love the present, and create a future that resonates with our deepest values. This, my friends, is the primary focus of the book.

In order to understand and take charge of our own situation requires the ability to take stock of our lives in meaningful ways, not only for us but for others as well. That's the definition of wisdom. Yes, wisdom is the result of firsthand experience and learning, but it's much more than that. It's the ability to use the knowledge to positively change ourselves—and by doing so, we consequently contribute to the betterment of society.

WAYS TO WITHER

- Never change! Stay predictable so that everyone around you can set their watch

by your behavior.

- Don't do anything physical, and eat to the point of no return.
- Complain a lot about everyone and everything, without doing anything about it.
- Make sure that you're totally invested in your own beliefs so you can open your own temple and be the guru of all knowing.
- Wait to enjoy yourself, putting it off until you don't even remember what made you happy in the first place.

I love to laugh, and I hope you'll see the humor in many of my messages. You get juicier the more you chuckle! Imagine the people who research cardiac function discovering that when you laugh, you release nitrous oxide (laughing gas), which in turn may improve blood flow in capillaries. Their findings promote the fact that laughter may actually lower your risk of heart disease. Studies have recently showed that a fun-packed life—one that includes dancing, solving puzzles, playing a musical instrument, or learning a foreign language—could help prevent Alzheimer's. (Even if you didn't get it, at the very least you might have more to forget.) I wonder if Conchetta is sitting up there on the edge of a cloud, waving her spaghetti spoon like a baton and exclaiming, "Lighten up!"

These days, it seems to me that not a week goes by without a magazine or news show doing a "special report" on aging. Why are they all so interested in this "hot" new topic? Well, one of the biggest reasons is that the baby-boom generation is reaching 60 at the rate of 11,000 a day. These folks have never done anything in a passive way, and they aren't going to take aging lying down. This leaves us with a very interesting phenomenon: We have the boomers who don't want to get old like their parents and a culture that's youth obsessed. It's going to be harder for them to grow old than the previous generations. It's funny to watch how some people try to avoid the effects of aging. . . . We've seen decades of people run, bike, and aerobicize themselves into a host of physical problems. Statistics show that hip and knee replacements will soon be as commonplace as going food shopping. It might be that older people just used to live with joint pain, and now they have a surgical option to relieve it. But it also seems to me that people of our generations exercised, like much else, to excess, and their bodies are now showing the wear and tear.

I should know—I did everything to excess. I was even an aerobics teacher for quite a while, and I literally pounded my joints into the pavement. But I now have a nice new hip, and who knows what body part might come next? I can't go through any kind of airport screening process without setting off alarms. Today, I consider myself "the most wanted woman in America."

Unlike many of my generation, I didn't become a fanatic about my diet, however. My Italian roots made it too difficult for me to get invested in the spiritual path of deprivation. I just can't buy into the demonization of food that's been going on for the last decade or so. The level of obsessiveness outweighs any positive effects of healthy eating. Many individuals who seek to stay young are now on a quest to find food that's grown organically, hasn't been exposed to unnatural substances, and has been hand delivered from the farm to the supermarket by 18-year-old virgins.

I agree that it makes perfect sense to try and eat food that's nutritious and healthy, but if you keep attempting to divide foods into "dirty" or "clean," it turns mealtime into a very stressful event. It makes me feel as if I have to take out the vacuum and rubber gloves just to have lunch. How did my grandmother ever make it to 93 consuming "tainted" sausage, salami, and prosciutto?

Her nutritional habits echo those of many Europeans. The so-called French paradox has recently created quite a stir. Researchers studying nutrition were surprised to discover how much cheese and other saturated fats French citizens ate and still managed to maintain their weight. Scientists have attributed a variety of reasons to this anomaly, including the intake of red wine by the French. But by and large, the answer is simple: They eat in moderation and always have someone to sit down at the table with, just as my grandmother did.

Eating alone regularly isn't a healthy option for aging well. Loneliness can foster depression, depression increases the possibility of heart attacks, and heart attacks can kill us. We can all have a cardiac incident, but why have it alone? We have a greater chance of surviving if someone else is around. A recent report shows that more than 25 percent of Americans are lonely, and the kinds of food they eat don't make them feel any more wanted or loved.

Anti-aging enthusiasts have embraced plastic surgery as though going under the knife was as easy as brushing one's teeth, but we've all seen those face-lift advocates who've gone too far and look as if they've gotten stuck in a wind tunnel. There are a plethora of procedures that we can invest in to either spruce ourselves up a bit or make dramatic changes.

Believe me, I've thought about having several. It's pretty bad when your breasts start to spread under your armpits, and you need a bra that could double as a condo for a family of seven. What happened to those perky breasts that stood at attention? Well, they're certainly at parade rest now. . . .

There are also creams and hair products that tout their youth-enhancing properties. I could make an elephant's hide look as smooth as silk with all the age-defying serums I've bought for my skin. With failing eyesight, it becomes increasingly more difficult to see the labels on the bottles, so there have been times when I've put conditioner on my face and night cream on my hair—I can honestly say that I got the same outcome.

Others use fashion to upgrade their age. It's all well and good to appear up-to-date, hip, and smart, but if you try to look like the Olsen twins at 60, you may end up looking more like a clown without a circus.

When we're young, we're not gifted with common sense or a real appreciation for the reality that we won't live forever in perfect health. No young person really wants to hear this, because our mentality is geared toward believing in immortality. One of my mother's favorite quotes was by George Bernard Shaw: "Youth is wasted on the young." I can truly say that I get it now.

But then what? If you're like me, you've probably expended a lot of energy blaming yourself, thinking, *If only I had kept a steady weight . . . I should have stuck to doing more yoga . . . If only I had eaten more cauliflower. . . .* But "shoulding" on yourself only makes you feel worse. So what's the point? Better to begin where you are now, and remember, *it is never too late to start aging well!*

JUICY TIDBITS

- Can you think of someone in your family whose life you find an inspiration, whose wisdom and accomplishments you admire? If so, try to find out everything you

can about the person's life.

- Do you resemble the individual—physically, mentally, or spiritually?
- Can you correlate some of your behaviors to ancestors or immediate family?
- Do you see any particular talent or skill that's repeated in yourself or your children?
- Who are the juiciest individuals in your gene pool?
- Have you considered creating a family history to pass down? It's not only an interesting exercise, but one that might save your life or that of someone who's dear to you. Medical conditions can be inherited, and knowing certain information about your ancestors can help your doctor create a better diagnosis.

JUICY TIDBITS

- In an interesting article from the *Authentic Happiness Coaching Newsletter* of the University of Pennsylvania, Ben Dean, Ph.D., examines research on wisdom and its connection to happiness in older adults: "Wisdom is a positive predictor of successful aging. In fact, wisdom is more robustly linked to the well-being of older people than objective life circumstances such as physical health, financial well-being, and physical environment (Ardelt, 1997; Baltes, Smith, & Staudinger, 1992; Bianchi, 1994; Clayton, 1982; Hartman, 2000)."
- Dr. Dan Baker in his best-selling book *What Happy People Know* writes about the scientific side of wisdom and our brains. The more intelligence we seek, the more developed our brain cells will be; that is, more dendrites will form ("branches" that transmit electrical impulses). An "ultimate brain cell" has a sixth branch, which is created and continues to evolve in individuals who have surpassed general facts and knowledge and have attained wisdom:

Wisdom almost always ushers in happiness, and was recently shown . . . to be the best single predictor for aging well. . . . To grow, a sixth-branch dendrite must be actively searching for knowledge. In this search, it is partly motivated by the pleasure of using strong neuronal connections. But at this mature stage of brain development, which usually occurs in midlife or later, pleasure alone is not always enough to prompt the search. Often, the motivation for growth, at this elevated level of consciousness, is to understand suffering—in hopes of ending it.

STILL KICKIN'

WHY WE LOVE SOPHIA LOREN

Okay, call me superficial if you want, but you have to love Sophia Loren simply because she's magnificently, radiantly, and uniquely beautiful. No one looks like her . . . and no one has tried. Unlike the rush of actresses trying to

copy the iconic looks of great Hollywood beauties such as Marilyn Monroe or Brigitte Bardot, there's never been another Sophia. From her perfect bone structure to her ample curves and gorgeous big butt—and her impeccable sense of style—she exudes elegance, femininity, and power in a way that few other women do.

She once said of her figure: “Everything you see I owe to spaghetti.” I know that feeling!

But what's most extraordinary about Sophia is that her beauty is just as striking now as it was half a century ago. Her regal bearing and elegant style still make her, even in her 70s, a woman of profound sensuality and radiance.

I agree with the archbishop of Genoa, who jokingly said that even though the Vatican is opposed to human cloning, “an exception might be made in the case of Sophia Loren.”