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# New Things: A Ritual For Maintaining Resilience and Aliveness

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By Melissa Bradley-Ball (55 years old)

A 56th birthday is looming and I brace for it with excitement as well as a bit of trepidation on whether I can really find fifty-six NEW things to experience this year. On the half-century celebration, a commitment was made to strive to be a senior citizen that would LIVE life to the very end, really living with a sense of gratitude and adventure.

A professional colleague (Charles Wells, wrote a wonderful book before he died, called *Dear Old Man*. As a geriatric psychiatrist, Wells wanted to write himself a "letter" (which became a book) on what he learned from treating the geriatric population. Several of the messages of the book were:

- Focus on what is going well. Don't focus only on what is going wrong.
- Reach out to loved ones instead of thinking they will do all of the work in nourishing the relationship.
- Learn new things. Take risks. Play. Love.

These were but a few of the things I found (in my early 40s when his book came out) that I was already doing like a geriatric person. Wells book should be a classic I understand that he lived his own lessons until his passing.

While on summer break in elementary and junior high, my lifelong best friend and I were forced to visit nursing homes with our moms who were American Red Cross volunteers. We would have preferred to sit in the car and talk, sleep or play games, but we were made to visit then "old." We didn't like it, partly because we were scared. The folks rarely smiled, except when our moms held their hands, brought them candy or flowers and tomatoes from their garden. When they would sit and chat with people who had great difficulty speaking, most people would light back up.

Mary (Jenny's) mom would try to get people to come into the activities room to do art or singing. I was confused why people who were capable chose to remain in an isolated dark room. As I age, I better understand the inertia of a comfort zone and how dangerous a comfort zone can become. Life begins to shrink one choice at a time until some become bitter, filled only with all that is "bad" or "stupid." The negativity pushes people away and the vortex of emptiness deepens.

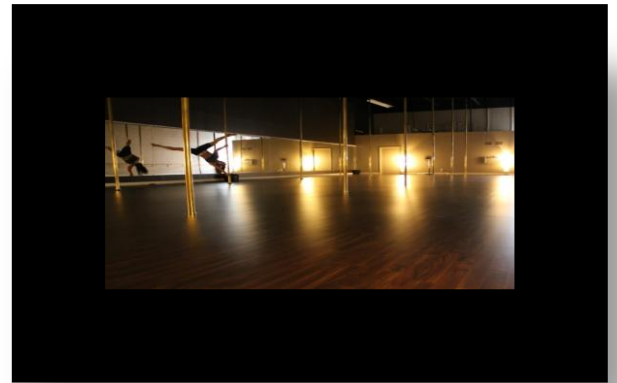
One woman was different. Not having had grandparents alive after my birth, old people were an anomaly for me. When I became a volunteer in college, Mrs. Jackson was in a nursing home too. She had been a lifelong teacher and although she was completely blind, the light from her shone brightly. Mrs. Jackson was loving, curious, never complained, always wanted to learn more and she listened to records for the blind all day...continuing to fill her mind with new ideas. She loved young people who came to spend time with her and although she was 102, she was wise and as mentally and emotionally vibrant as the healthiest 45 year old I have met. Mrs. Jackson did not live her life in fear. She trusted and loved and she was a great mentor to me. No one is ever too old or too feeble to make a positive difference.

When Jenny's mother died this past October, her eulogy was filled with the memories of those she had touched and inspired, well past her ability to communicate verbally. I want to be a teacher until the day I draw my last breath, like Mary and Mrs. Jackson.

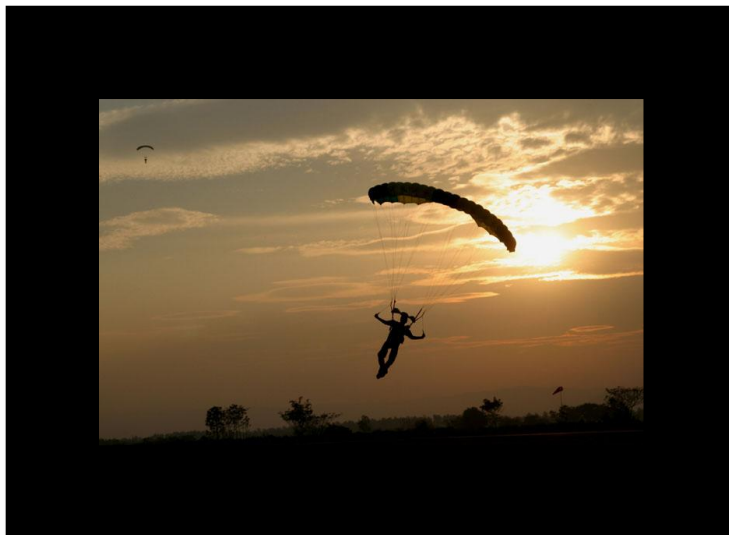
In order to be a vibrant elder, it begins now with the choices of how to live now. If we don't live vibrantly at 30, 40 or 50, why would we do it any differently at 60, 70 or even 102? We say yes or no to life each and every day with what and how we choose to fill our minds and hearts.

It has been nearly six years since I began the "new things list." at 50 I had to do 50 new things, at 51 it was 51 new things and so on. Some years I have done more than my number and some I had to step it up the last three months before my birthday.

To give you an example of the list, the second thing that went on the list after turning 50, was taking a (fully clothed) pole dancing lesson in Las Vegas. Keep in mind that Oprah had just featured this respectable and physically challenging exercise on her show. It had taken Pilates studios by storm. When a friend turned forty four weeks after I turned fifty, she took the list to heart and signed us up on a business trip. I wanted to say no, not because I thought it was wrong, but because I would feel stupid (Dr. Wells called that one, didn't he?). I must admit that I did have to take my bifocals off in front of all of the mirrors in the studio when I had visions of a (pole) dancing hippo a la Disney's *Fantasia*. I did feel silly (not stupid) but I was later grateful



that I took the leap. It was my only pole dancing lesson, but like opera singer, Beverly Sills wore on a bracelet BTDT (Been there done that) and I was in basic training for knowing how to play at 102.



Some other things that ended up on the list the last six years was:

I faced my introverted and somewhat inhibited self by reaching out to strangers as I travel. I had feared I would

offend then, it didn't, that they would reject me, they didn't, and they might react oddly, they didn't...they were just as worried to be the first.

Solo trips abroad - goal: to face the fear of "you'll be a victim of a brutal attack" mentality and found that in other countries, they love their kids, they smile, they have deep values, they play and, they respect their elderly family.

I choose to risk rejection by practicing living with an open heart. I was warned to hold back and a great coach in the Bay Area (Dr. Daniel Ellenberg) said "be yourself and see who or what shows up." Daniel's advice paid off and I have no regrets.

I continue to learn that there is amazing life while being a member of the AARP. Although I am not retired, I think the word retirement is a mindset. It doesn't mean retire from life. I think it means, live with abandon. Retirement is hopefully never going to be in my future

because as an educator, I am gunning to be another Mrs. Jackson, even when I am not being paid for it.

How many new things are on your list this year? It means to continually say yes to living, to facing your fears so the world and comfort zone doesn't shrink to nothingness. The yes doesn't have to be huge, it is more about the practice of it that matters. The practice strengthens our creativity, vibrancy and aliveness "muscles," keeping us in shape for another decade of life.

What is on your yes list this week? Your choice will be one stepping stone to the rest of your life. The rest of your life starts...NOW.