

## **Aging in Place: Good Enough Aging**

Marian L. Knapp

Lately I have been reading up on “successful aging” to understand better what people mean when they use the term. I thought it would be helpful to figure out what significance it may have for me and to see whether I am living up to whatever the goals and standards of successful aging should be. I must admit that the term strikes me as a little odd. Success for me is achieving a goal that is personally meaningful, has a tangible outcome, and for which I worked hard. How does this notion of success apply to getting older?

John W. Rowe and Robert L. Kahn in their oft-cited book “Successful Aging” say that successful aging means “...aging well...” and that the “...three main components of successful aging [are] avoiding disease and disability, maintaining mental and physical function, and continuing engagement in life”(p.68). They go on to explore the differences between younger and older people on these dimensions noting that older people are often at higher risk in all of them. So, successful aging seems to mean a lot of what I know already - the things that will help me move into the future in the best way possible.

I recognize that keeping my brain active, exercising my body, eating sensibly, being involved in my community, and staying connected to family and friends will help me be “successful.” But, fundamentally, I must be the one to define what successful aging is for me and how high or low to set my targets. At this point in my life (actually any point), I will not strive for great athletic prowess – I can set this threshold fairly low. Try to walk 3-4 times a week, maybe. I eat pretty sensibly but my poundage has crept up over the years. Will I ever get back to my high school graduation weight? Probably not. “Should I try to lose a few pounds so that I don’t feel guilty every time I get on the scale?” Yes – we’ll see.

Being connected to my community is pretty important because I know the value of learning about and being involved in the place where I live. It’s great to walk down the street being able to say “hi!” to an increasing number of people. My world is getting bigger, not shrinking. I set this target modestly high. Keeping my brain active – this is way up there on the list. Not being able to learn, think, write, and be creative would present a real problem for me emotionally and psychologically. I have set this as an important priority and I work at it almost every day.

The biggest one is staying connected to family and friends – both old-time and new-time. These important relationships feed and restore my memories, encourage me to learn from the past, while they give me constant encouragement to keep moving ahead.

As I look at the things that are important to me the notion of aging “well” seems more appropriate than aging “successfully.” Success feels rigid while “well” feels less intimidating but it still implies a standard that I may or may not be able to achieve.

This brings me to the idea of “good enough aging.” I didn’t invent this term. It comes from my sister-in-law who has thought a lot about the importance of identifying and accepting what is “good enough.” Here are some simple examples. When she did work on her kitchen the new counters weren’t perfect (even if she could define what perfect was) but they served their purpose, and were good enough. She is a great cook but when she makes a meal for a large gathering she realizes that what she serves may not satisfy completely the diverse needs of her guests but she tries hard to make a meal that most people will like, and it’s good enough.

These little stories don’t reflect the complex nature of getting older but they help me put my life in a new context. Within this “good enough aging” construct I feel at peace with what I have accomplished –caring for elders, raising kids, spending time with grandkids, keeping my body in reasonable shape, learning and growing my mind, and looking forward to writing my next article. I expect I won’t be “successful” according to some extreme goals (like living to be 100) but I do anticipate that my “good enough” attitude will keep me moving along from one day to the next without getting bogged down in the unattainable.

This is a very freeing concept. I don’t have to push myself to do things I don’t want to do. I can emphasize and pay attention to what is most important according to my own values. I don’t have to compare myself to some unrealistic (or unimportant) criteria but set my standards consistent with what is doable and has meaning for me – that’s good enough.

*Marian L. Knapp, a 40-year Newton resident and care-giver of many elders, received her Ph.D. at age 70 after completing her dissertation on “Aging in Place in Suburbia”. She is Chair of the Newton Council on Aging, a citywide committee appointed by the mayor and Board of Aldermen. Visit her blog at <http://voicesofaging.com>.*

Copyright 2012 Newton TAB. Some rights reserved