

Two different kinds of seniors

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On one recent Wednesday, I opened the Newton TAB and noticed the headline, “The big decision looms ahead” by Margaret Larkin {May 2, 2012}. I really like Margaret’s articles and feel a bit of kinship with her. She writes about real-life experiences as a mother with a young family (including teens). I try to do the same thing, only my topic is aging—extreme ends of a long spectrum of living. The first line in her article included the phrase “after a month of deliberation around the supper table, most of Newton’s seniors have decided where they will call home for the next four years.” The word “seniors” jumped out. How terrific—she is writing about seniors! For about two seconds, I was confused about what she meant by “call home for the next four years.” Was she talking about elder housing? And what was that “four years” all about? Seniors don’t think about “four years” of home-life. Then it hit me. She wasn’t talking about my “seniors,” she was talking about hers – high school seniors. Aha! The “four years” made sense.

Isn’t it interesting that we have one word that, depending on the context, changes meaning completely and profoundly? Margaret’s seniors are at the beginning of a long life of learning, careers, changes, and challenges. Perhaps they will build their own families with next generations of “seniors.” My seniors, including me, also face changes and challenges, and, hopefully, ongoing learning. But my path and the amount of time I have to travel along it are quite dissimilar. For example, I won’t produce any more high school seniors. I have grandchildren who will make college decisions, but not for another ten years. I hope I will see them move into their first phase of adulthood. Even if I don’t, I know they will make good choices and have meaningful lives because they are already thoughtful people with thoughtful parents.

Surely, there is much angst about the college decision, but Margaret makes a great point when she says “college will be but one chapter in that beautiful tale” of his life. Because I am the other kind of senior, I know this to be so true. I remember choosing colleges, along with acceptances and rejections, although it didn’t seem to have the import that it does today. Maybe it was a traumatic time, but if it was, the intensity has diminished– practically disappeared. I’ve had 55 years to get over it. As a young person, my expectations of what I wanted my adulthood to be like changed throughout childhood, teenager hood, college and far beyond. Since I graduated from college, my life has gone in directions that I could never have imagined. Perhaps, decisions I made as a teen influenced my ultimate life achievements but, in reality, not much. The simple reason is that I didn’t know what was out there until I moved into the expansive, ever-changing world. Each step I took opened up new arenas leading to endless options. At the time, I didn’t necessarily notice what was

happening but, looking back, I have one extremely important insight. Keeping my mind receptive and flexible occasionally lead to something unexpected – even wondrous.

The word “senior” elicits opposite reactions depending on where someone is in life. Being a senior (high school) evokes visions of an unimaginably long future with many quests and choices. This stage can be filled with anxiety largely because of the unknowns ahead, but, in general, it is positive, exciting – a gigantic endless universe to explore in time and space. Believing that a decision made now will forever dictate the future is simply wrong. Buying into that notion can inhibit creative explorations down the road. I can say this with confidence because I have been through it—not once, but many times.

The other senior (the elder) can engender less exciting images. I (and others like me) can have significant anxiety about what’s coming, primarily because I already know what some of the unknowns can be. Will my body continue to behave? Will my mind remember what it needs to? Will my creative self keep creating? Where will I live and will I need someone to take care of me? These aren’t pleasurable to think about but just as the other seniors are facing questions, so am I. The resolutions I craft now will make a big impact on my future, which, would you believe, I still see as exciting! If my goal is to keep living an imaginative life, then I need to make plans to achieve that. In fact, my actions now may be more critical than they ever were when I was the other kind of senior. So, I must arrange for on-going discovery. I have lots of great experience to fuel and propel my exploration. It’s scary but exhilarating—almost the same as when I was a senior in high school.