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What is Positive Aging? (602 Words)

Ms. Brody's Op-Ed "*Finding Meaning and Happiness in Old Age* (March 19, 2018, NYT)" referred to Positive Aging (PA), a construct I developed some years back (See: Hill [2005]. *Seven Strategies for Positive Aging*, WW Norton, NY. What serendipitous timing! Her Op-Ed caused me to revisit why I added PA to terms like Successful Aging that emphasize physical decline and seem more bewildering than clarifying. Brody is right, PA is how mindset, not biology, influences getting old.

I'm a psychotherapist of older clientele. I know from my own experience, and my clients', that when old age hits, fear is the prominent emotion because aging is unattractive. You think to yourself, "I'm old and not useful." Decline may fuel fear, but it doesn't cause it. It's hard to be happy when you're burdened with thoughts of decline even if the goal is minimizing it. Positive Aging is different. It's a personal choice to emphasize aspects of one's self, even if diminished, that keep you engaged creatively with the future.

PA challenges the notion that your personal worth is how well you resist decline, or by conjecture, stay young. PA is taking pride in being old, affirming that your chronological age is

worth celebrating, not hiding, afraid it's a bad thing. Take, for instance, a Rolex Watch. Just because a Rolex Watch is old or manufactured with out-of-date single-use technology, doesn't mean a Rolex Watch is no longer useful, something to be tossed away in the corner of a drawer. On the contrary, a Rolex Watch is and always will be a Rolex Watch. It's value inherent in what it is, a timeless timepiece.

As a university professor for 25 years, I confronted old-age decline. It started with people talking about who I was; a white, sixty-year-old, upper-middle-class, male, tenured professor - a poster child of academic elitism - I perceived I was an object of derision due to characteristics I had no control over. It appeared that time was pushing me out, so I retired. The change was agonizing. So much of my identity wrapped up in my professorial status, or so it seemed.

Shortly after bidding adieu to my university community, the pangs of aging crept in. I felt alone, all used up. Evidence of my obsolescence was everywhere, especially when shortly after that I was diagnosed with cancer. The term "Positive Aging" that I developed as a youthful academician was all I had left to address this challenge. I recalled its four characteristics old persons who were vibrant, alive, and resilient. These were people not bothered by age-related decline because they knew how to: (1) mobilize their resources, (2) promote their own wellbeing, (3) flexibly respond to challenge, (4) generate optimism where they could. When I

began applying them I discovered PA on a gut level because my attitude went from bad to good. Still, I'm old, anyone who encounters me would agree. I look old, act old, my social circles are minuscule, I'm not pushing myself like I used to, when I get hurt, I stay down longer, I'm declining, all reasons for discouragement. But I'm content because I don't focus on these things. Instead, I ask what old age can do for me, like letting me carve my own path, do what I want, be me. I no longer fret over what I'm not, because when you're old such flimsy future concerns are not worry-worthy. Positive Aging is present-centered, realistic, not demanding. To be a Positive Ager is to accept yourself as old and everything that goes along with it discovering in the process what it means to be alive.

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