

September 29, 2002

“FIVE WAYS TO LIVE A LONGER AND HAPPIER LIFE.”

“Hear, my children and accept my words, that the years of your life will be many.” Proverbs 4:10

One day several months ago, my wife clipped an article out of the *Good Housekeeping Magazine* entitled “*Six Ways To Live A Longer (And Happier) Life.*” She wrote across the top of the page, “This would make a good sermon!” (Exclamation point). Now having been married to Peggy for 43 years, and having helped to rear our three daughters, who are long since fully grown, and having learned a few things in other places about women over the course of my life, emphasis there is on a few, I was of course grateful for the idea. I am always on the lookout for sermons. But before long, I began to wonder why my darling wife selected this particular topic, out of all the others which are available. The first part was familiar. She has long said she wants me to take care of myself so that our golden years can be golden together.

I was saddened the other day with an article I read about Ronald and Nancy Reagan, where Nancy was saying how lonely she was and how sad that Alzheimer’s disease had stolen their golden years away. There apparently is not too much you can do, not at this time anyway, to avoid or to cure Alzheimer’s, (maybe you can delay it); but there are a myriad of ways to prevent other difficulties traditionally associated with aging. The “living longer” suggestion was fine.

But then there was that “And Happier”, with the bold exclamation point! Did she mean, I pondered, that in my increasing years, I had drifted away from the happy-go-lucky playful handsome young thing I was back in the early years of our marriage?

My fear was confirmed a little, while on vacation this August. When our whole family was together, the subject of being positive came up. There was a unanimous consensus by our children that we would all benefit if we could spend one entire day looking to the brighter side of things. Be positive. One daughter even proposed a family game which would encourage us to love and laugh together and not be grouchy. I found out later that with the “grouchy” they were referring to me.

To my amazement each time I volleyed a positive uplifting comment into the family fun and games that day, I was greeted with cheers and Pavlovian-like encouragement. “Way to go Dad.” “See, we can do it.” And the winner: “See, isn’t it easy Dad, when you put your mind to it!” I began to think I was a grouch. Me?

My wife’s major contribution to the day, or at least as I remember it, was the following story: she said that often people say to her, “It must be so nice to live with

Dr. Cromie. He has such a fine sense of humor and he is so kind and concerned with people.” I said humbly, “Isn’t that nice? I didn’t know people said that.” Then with a dramatic pause, born of four decades plus of being a husband, a man, and the head of our home, I said passively to my wife: “What do you say to them Peg?” She said, “I just swallow hard and try to smile a little.”

Oh dear. There are no heroes left in this aging world. It would be so easy to say. “He’s a delight to be with.” But as the old story has it: The problem with a minister’s wife is that she has to live with him all week long, and then pretend he is the voice of God on Sunday morning! Oh dearie me.

But being kind and understanding and forgiving, with all my meandering thoughts, I filed her suggestion away and when the sermon series for this present quarter came up, I set aside my reservations and suspicions, and scheduled this topic for today. It was not so easy a sermon as I supposed.

For one thing the topic raises dozens of weighty problems about what it is that brings us longer and happier lives. The *Good Housekeeping Magazine* has an advantage over a preacher. (I mean no disrespect.) It is expected to simplify things, to keep them brief, to cut the corner on explanations and to offer the bottom line, heart of the matter, without involving the reader along the way.

It is the same advantage which the *Reader’s Digest Magazine* has used and capitalized on for years. To a fast moving overly busy restless reading public, which does not need or want to explore and search around for deeper meanings, a quick hitting summary of the issues is sufficient. The same theory lies behind the *Readers Digest Condensed Books*. You can get the gist of the author’s story, or plot without having to work it through. That’s O.K. But you also miss the beauty and the language and the grandeur of how the novel develops. In preaching classes at seminaries we used to jest about the “Reader’s Digest” kind of preachers whose sermons are best characterized in one professor’s commentary; “They are scattered glimpses of the obvious.” Short and sweet. Oh dear.

The aforementioned article on “*How To Live a Longer and Happier Life*” set the pace with this captioned summary inserted at the top of the three page article, “Experts now say it’s possible to add years to your life by making a few simple changes in the way you live, think, and love. The sooner you start, the better off you will be.” Now what could be simpler or easier than that?

In this matter of a longer and happier life (It’s about time I got to the sermon.) I have divided my homiletical suggestions into five parts, the first of which is the most

difficult to condense to sermonic length. But it is critical to the entire subject. I say it this way:

I. First, the best way to help yourself to a long and happy life is “To Choose Healthy and Happy Grandparents.” The surest way to prepare yourself for a healthy body, mind, and soul is to capitalize on the genetic pool passed along from generation to generation. Long ago we came to understand that physical characteristics are part and parcel of genetic preconditioning. You can easily see family resemblances just by looking.

For example, a few weeks ago, the daughter of an older cousin of mine happened to be visiting Palm Beach County with her husband and decided to drop into the Royal Poinciana Chapel for worship to hear Cousin Richard (that’s me) preach a sermon. I had not seen her for a while, and when I had, it was always at funerals and weddings, in a rush. I looked out at the congregation where she was seated with my wife (that helped); but several times during the service, as I looked over that way, I thought I was seeing my older cousin, her Aunt, rather than she.

In recent years we have learned much more about how other non-physical attributes are inherited. Like sadly, the tendency to mental and emotional illnesses can be passed along through the genes, sometimes allowing almost no possible escape. Researchers are now concluding that addiction to alcohol and drugs can run in families. Surely illness and disease stand at the top of the list.

For example, we lost a dear and wonderful friend a year or two ago who died at 63. She was a dear: beautiful in body, mind, and soul. We all met in high school and have remained close friends ever since. Her mother was also a gem. We loved her mother, and wept when she died of Cancer when we were newlyweds, 35 years ago. And, don’t you know, the daughter our friend, who took excellent care of herself always: she ate right, drank little, never smoked, exercised regularly, loved the Lord, served her church, stayed calm.... And still, at almost the exact same age at which her mother developed the same Cancer, which was still incurable, she passed away in about the same time frame as her mother had, way back then.

My examples are in the negative. I know; but they go to prove the point, that much of what and who we are, including good health, mental and emotional stability, even our preferences for the kinds of food and drinks we ingest, seem to come to us as givens, long before we make conscious decisions to adopt or reject where life leads us.

In my family, don’t anybody laugh: you can see the results in a variety of shapes and forms, especially shapes. We have a built-in tendency to be attracted to foods

which work against the tall thin bodies we aspire to be. My own metabolism is ever on the look out for calories, lots of them. You can watch the Cromies at any buffet, brunch or supper, and most of them will be feasting away on the chicken wings, stuffed cabbage rolls, bacon rolled around chicken livers, followed by mashed potatoes, roast beef, and gravy, to say nothing of the desert table. Covert Bailey, the Nutritionist, once included in his book a chapter titled "*Skinny people eat more than fat people.*" He was wrong. But wrong or not, the individual metabolism of the human body is a given; and within the range of what we can do to direct it, it is largely beyond our control.

The point I was making, a little self defensive to be true, is that life can be unfair in many ways, but also with inherited tendencies. The preconditioning of health and stability and behavior which come from our genes is often overlooked. If you happen to swim around in a fine and fancy protected pool of genes; be grateful that you chose the grandparents which you did. Thank God, and your lucky stars.

II. But secondly, we also need to help those genes along, whichever they are. I can hear couples all around the Sanctuary and beyond, nudging their spouses and whispering, "See I told you it was my mother's or your mother's fault." Just because you have a tendency towards this or that bodily structure or preferences for certain kinds of foods, you cannot allow yourself to sit back and enjoy it, or alternatively endure it, as the case may be. Genetic pre-conditioning comes in ranges. It seldom predetermines our characteristics exactly. There is room for conditioning its limits and its hidden power over you. If you have a natural tendency to gain weight, as many do, you (we) need to work consciously to eat nutritionally balanced meals. Eat fruits and vegetables; take supplemental vitamins and minerals and nutrients; be sensible!

It will also do to exercise regularly, 30-45 minutes three times a week, even just as brisk a walk as you can manage. You don't need fancy machinery. One New England survey concluded that those who exercise three times a week live on the average 30% longer than those who don't. I have tried it all through the years, sometimes with success, often not; but I have never felt better than when I am on the move with regular exercise.

Dr. Samuel Lindsay, beloved pastor here at the Chapel for 30 years, who preached his last sermon in this pulpit by the way, when he was 99½ years old. That's incredible. If we repeated it in our generation I would still be your pastor in 2036 A.D., with a record setting 41 years at the helm. And I was hoping to retire in 2005. Anyway Dr. Lindsay used to preach that "While there are good medical men all around, the best three doctors you need to visit and follow are: one, Dr. Diet; two, Dr. Quiet; and three, Dr. Merry Man."

What he meant was that you can consciously set out to control your physical frame by diet. You can choose to seek quiet times, away from the rush of the world. Learn meditation if you want to. But just to get away alone once in a while is a good start. Dr. Merry Man (merry woman) is as important as the other two: a good sense of humor to laugh often and more often at yourself will serve you well. You can/must work to help your genes along.

III. But three, you must learn to be content. St. Paul said it best, “I have learned in all things to be content.” The stress of life, as Hans Selye called it fifty years ago, “The stress of life can kill you.” Look closer at St. Paul’s words. We rest on “Be content.” True, but he wrote: “I have learned to be content whatever comes.” “I have learned.” Contentment does not come naturally. You have to learn it, like you have to learn to work your computer; like you have to learn another language; like you have to learn to relax; you must work at it, plan to prosper it day and night, everywhere you go and in everything you do. Whatever age you are, you can learn to be content.

One secret to learning it is in an old familiar prayer to many of you: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change: the courage to change the things I can: and the wisdom to know the difference.” (The Serenity Prayer) And the wisdom to know the difference. Learn to be content!

IV. Fourth, be sociable, cultivate friendships, be a pleasant person to be around. Be Happy. Sometimes it takes an effort; life can be so unfair; but to be a good friend is the greatest gift you can give.

We hear a lot of talk these days in the financial circle about diversifying your portfolio of stocks and bonds. Probably that is good advice; but you need to diversify your social contacts too. You need a good social portfolio. Herbert Spencer would never read a book by an author he did not like and whose ideas he rejected. He refused to learn. You need a variety of people to challenge and strengthen you.

Dr. David Snowden wrote a book not long ago titled *Aging With Grace*. There he tells of the extensive research on what happens to your body when you become angry or depressed or “grouchy.” Your body releases powerful stress hormones which can weaken your immune system and increase your risk of strokes or heart attacks. It is apparently no longer true that grouchy people live longer.

Then, there was a Mayo Clinic study with 800 people over 30 years. All 800 of them were typed either as pessimists or optimists. 30 years later, the negative group were 30% more likely to have had serious health problems or to have passed away. The

study concluded, “Pessimists believe things happen to them; optimists express a sense of control; they challenge whatever comes.”

Be positive; surround yourself with challenging people. Master something new all the time. Stimulate your mind. Seek opportunities to learn and expand. Be creative. Work on friendships. Be involved. Be sociable.

V. Fifth and last, you were probably wondering when I would get around to this: Be spiritual. Secular research has often found that those who have religious or spiritual beliefs experience less anxiety and depression than others who do not. A recent Duke University study found that people who pray have a 50% less chance of getting a variety of illnesses than those who rarely or never do. (So, what else is new?) The relationship between faith and healing has been known for centuries. If you feel at home in the universe and understand that God is concerned with you and your welfare, it is a blessed and comforting feeling. Attending a balanced worship service gives you a mental and spiritual challenge, stretches your brain, gives you good social contacts; and if the music is good, one study added, it will bring peace to your life and soul.

The book of Proverbs, chapter four, is investigating wisdom. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. “Hear, my children and accept my words, that the years of your life will be many.”

The secret, Jesus taught us, is that happiness and joy within your soul are basically gifts from God. They come back to us as we commit ourselves to Christ and to our determination to find his purpose for our lives: to live it and share it. Strange unpredictable things surely come. Life can be outrageous in its demands. But we have a wonderful guide and guard to see us through. The road is often rugged and steep, but One is there who will take you by the hand and walk you through it.

One question before we go! Do you have your goal and purpose in mind? The question which lurks around the nearest corner, and which follows you home each night, and which greets you every time you enter church is “How much do you want goodness to prevail? How much do you want Christ to win the battle? How much do you want to change the world for good? How much do you want to be happy and to share that happiness with others in His name, to find peace in doing his will?”

By the way, do you think Jesus was happy? I mean in the way we define happiness. Would you say that dying at 33, as our Lord was forced to do; would you say that being despised and rejected of men, would help? Would you call his a long and

happy life? Of course not! But God loved him and blessed him and gave him a name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

To live along and happy life:

- 1. Choose good grandparents.**
- 2. Help those genes along.**
- 3. Learn to be content.**
- 4. Be sociable.**
- 5. Learn to be like Jesus.**

For now and forever more. Amen.

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