



Advice for Septuagenarians

by Jonathan Aitken

The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.

Psalm 90:10

THESE VERSES from one of the greatest of the Psalms keep tumbling out of the attic of my memory, because this month I pass the milestone of my seventieth birthday. As we septuagenarians know, there is a certain ambivalence as to whether this anniversary should be regarded as an occasion for congratulations or commiseration. The Psalmist evidently thought the latter. But he was writing some three millennia before the advent of modern medicine, vitamin pills, exercise regimens, and other anti-aging palliatives. So perhaps a different approach is appropriate for 21st-century longevity.

A few years ago, I was a guest at Margaret Thatcher's seventieth birthday party. When Bill Deedes, a former cabinet minister and newspaper editor, proposed a toast, he quoted the above lines from the Psalm but without attribution. Apparently thinking that the sentiments came from Bill rather than from the Bible, Thatcher gave Deedes a good handbagging in response, along the lines of: "What's all this stuff and nonsense about labour and sorrow after three score years and ten then?"

Later in the evening, I asked if she realized that the "stuff and nonsense" was in fact a famous quotation. "Who wrote it?" she demanded. "King David, in the Psalms," was my answer. The Iron Lady, on the crest of her birthday wave, could have been back at Prime Minister's Questions. "Well, he got a lot of things wrong," she retorted. "As kings in the Middle East still do!"

Getting one's seventies right is an intriguing challenge. We need to realize that the importance or

unimportance of the number of years we have lived is an attitude of mind. Oliver Wendell Holmes, who was still handing down great judgments as a Supreme Court justice at the age of 90, caught the zeitgeist of his generation well when he said, at the seventieth birthday of Julia Ward Howe, "To be 70 years young is sometimes far more cheerful and hopeful than to be 40 years old."

Cheerfulness and hopefulness are two good starting points for entry into one's seventies. They evoke laughter, conviviality, optimism, and *joie de vivre*, which are attractive attributes at any stage in life. But as this is supposed to be a column about spiritual matters, let's move into deeper waters and have a shot at devising some guidelines for septuagenarians with an interest in life's spiritual dimension. Here are my top 10 recommendations:

1. *Be grateful.* At least once a day, find a moment to thank God for the privilege of life itself. Count your blessings. Make a point of expressing thanks to others. "Lend me a heart replete with thankfulness," said Shakespeare. A grateful heart is often a happy heart.

2. *Keep fit in body and mind.* Exercise renews the brain cells. The 12th-century rabbi Moses Maimonides, who was also a leading physician, believed that physical fitness was a religious duty. Intellectual exercise and spiritual fitness are part of the same calling as we strive to follow St. Paul's exhortations to "offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God," and "be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

3. *Get our accounts straight with God.* This means seeking his forgiveness with total honesty and humility, coupled with forgiving those who have hurt or wronged us. Also, at our age we should learn to stop judging people. Leave that to God. He is better at it than we are—and more forgiving, too.

4. *Participate in a spiritual community, such as a church or a prayer group.* As we join people who care about Godly ideals, we will be encouraged and inspired by their examples and sacrifices.

5. *Think about the next life.* It is a mystery, but there are answers to be found if we are willing to open our eyes to the horizons that lie beyond the grave. The seventies are a realistic time to begin contemplating the hour of one's death. With preparation, it can be faced without fear and even with joy.

6. *Renew old friendships and build new ones.* Heed Dr. Samuel Johnson's wise advice:

"A man, Sir, should keep his friendship in constant repair." An extension of one's circle to include younger friends, praying friends, and friends who radiate good energy, both spiritually and physically, is highly encouraged.

7. *Take less interest in the material life and seek more from the spiritual life.* Fulfillment has little to do with what we get and everything to do with what we give. So stop worrying about wealth, success, and status. Happiness is to be found in service—to our neighbors and to the Lord.

8. *"Love and then do what you like," wrote St. Augustine.* He was expressing it in the context of The Shema, the ancient command in the Book of Deuteronomy to love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our mind, all our soul, and all our strength. The New Testament enlarged the divine command into loving our neighbors (including the less-than-lovable ones!) and one another. In our seventies, perhaps we get better at this, as we realize there can be a new element of patriarchal love, and as we embrace our families, spouses, children, and grandchildren. With age, we find that we have more love to give.

9. *Make time to be peaceful and quiet, for nothing is so like God as stillness.* During most of our threescore years and ten, we expend our energies

rushing hither and yon, sending ever increasing numbers of texts and e-mails, and being generally and often rather pointlessly over-busy. The seventies may be the moment to take advice from a Simon and Garfunkel song our generation loved: "Slow down, you move too fast/You got to make the morning last."

What better way to do this than to obey another great spiritual exhortation? "Be still, and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10)

10. *Pray more.* This is the most important guideline of all. Set aside a regular period of quiet time each day for listening to and communicating with God, and your life will gradually be lifted to a new level of contentment. A wise

friend gave me this advice some years ago, and it has proved transformative. As I enter what I hope will be my less turbulent seventies, I shall try to deepen my prayer life, for I know this is the secret of a good life.

None of these signposts for the seventies are easy. I know how often I will stumble and fall when trying to follow them. But striving to make the journey along such guidelines can open the door to the Fruits of the Spirit, magnificently defined by St. Paul as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control." (Galatians 5:22-23) If we can be filled with these, the septuagenarian years will indeed be golden. ✨

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