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Secret of Youth: Savor the Journey

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The local Department of Motor Vehicles was bustling with activity as I seated myself, waiting to have an outdated picture replaced for my expiring driver's license. A young teenager looking to be around fifteen was already seated in the adjacent chair, clutching a handful of paperwork and a photo ID. He looked anxious, ruffling through his papers and faintly whispering to himself the statistics on blood alcohol concentration levels. After a few moments, the teen turned to me explaining that he was taking the written exam for his learner's permit and was concerned that he might not pass even though he had read the driver's license handbook over and over.

I assured him that most people who failed the exam had not been so diligent. In an effort to offer some distraction, I mentioned that I was there to have my picture made even though having reached a certain age, the state no longer required a driver's license photo. As a further diversion, I made a little joke saying I guessed the state of Tennessee didn't want old peoples' pictures on their licenses. My feeble attempt at humor obviously escaped him as he nodded his head and gave me a look suggesting that he saw a certain logic in this concept.

It was at that point I felt myself sliding with blinding speed into the great chasm that eventually separates us from our youth. All this in spite of the fact that I am active, look younger than my age, and the latest edition of MORE magazine had assured me that age 60 was really the new 45.

This awakening brought to mind an important question. How would our lives change if we could reset our personal clocks, turning back time? If our earlier life scripts could be rewritten with the benefit of current insight, would we make better choices? Would we be happier?

The premise that life's lessons learned would have better equipped us to navigate our childhood and early adulthood certainly seems logical. After all, we might have parented better, chosen healthier partners, handled relationships with better balance and set different priorities. On the other hand, it is the journey of trial and error, the rocky road of hard knocks that makes us what we are. Although often painful, it is what shapes us and gives birth to strengths and resources that might otherwise remain untapped.

Admittedly, character building potential is very difficult to see in the midst of traumatic and troubling circumstances. Such experiences can leave us so wounded and discouraged that the suggestion of any positive gain seems trite and insensitive. But the fact is, if we knew early in our lives what we know now,

we might have been too guarded and played it too safe, failing to take the calculated risks that makes life interesting and kindles the discovery of self.

The best antidote for growing old is not worrying so much about the destination but savoring what we learn in the journey. The poet Samuel Ullman said it best: “Nobody grows old merely by living a number of years. We grow old by deserting our ideals. Years may wrinkle the skin, but to give up enthusiasm wrinkles the soul.”