

Being in your nineties ain't what it used to be

by BROCK WEIR

What comes to mind when you think about what it means to be in your nineties?

Do images of grey hair come to mind?

How about visions of a slower gait?

Maybe it's a slightly different way of speaking ? slower, more methodical ? or even a thirst for days gone by, the ol' days that seem to always be remembered as the good ol', and simple nostalgia?

Maybe all of these things come to mind. Maybe none of them make the cut. But, if you're like me, whatever preconceived notions you have about getting ?old? are challenged all the time.

No, I don't think it's because, by the time this year's out, I will be nine months away from 40, but I think it can be chalked up to those in our community, our country, and on the world stage who do their utmost to challenge these concepts each and every day.

Take, for instance, the 75th annual Emmy Awards on January 15 which paid tribute to all those creatives, and their output, who have entertained us ? and continue to do so ? over the last three-quarters of a century.

Among the presenters were such television luminaries as Carol Burnett (The Carol Burnett Show), Marla Gibbs (The Jeffersons, 227), and Dame Joan Collins (Dynasty) ? all of whom are unbelievably in their 90s, showing little signs of slowing down. Heck, after a successful and critically acclaimed run on Better Call Saul little over two years ago, Burnett is set to bow in a new television series later this year.

This ain't your grandpa's definition of ?the nineties.?

In addition to the three aforementioned ladies, I was staggered to learn that this past December of Jane Fonda's most recent birthday, one which made her a comparative youngster of 86.

When I look at Fonda, who has, by her own admission, had some assistance in maintaining the façade ? and there will be no room for shame on that front in this space! ? just about everything belies notions we have of her years, from her outlook on life to the passions that continue to drive her on the path of social justice, whether or not you happen to subscribe to her views.

I couldn't help but think of my own grandparents when they reached the age of 86.

My paternal grandfather didn't have long to settle into 86 (he decided to call it a day on the very anniversary of his birth, little over an hour after his birthday party broke up, which was kind of an admirable way to go in my book!) but in the lead-up to it, he had many physical ailments which left him in a wheelchair.

My maternal grandmother, on the other hand, spent almost an entire year at 86 ? passing away less than two weeks before her 87th birthday ? a year which she too spent in a wheelchair with a variety of physical challenges as well.

If the physical was removed from the equation, I suspect the same differences would be quite evident. In my paternal grandfather's case, he had many a goal on his proverbial bucket list that had to be permanently put on the backburner in order to be a caregiver. In the instance of my maternal grandmother's case, it took a little bit longer for the physical ailments to manifest themselves but as soon as she turned an arbitrary age, she decided that, as such, there were certain things she could and could not do ? or would and would

not do ? simply on principle.

As a result, the decline was steep.

Outside of the world of entertainment, we can look to the examples of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, who were active, vital, interested, and forward-thinking until their deaths at 96 and 99 respectively.

Those, I feel, even from my layman's perspective, are the key ingredients to anything. Of course, money helps as well. You can have all the cosmetic support you want, but if you're not active, even if it is only in mind, interested in the world around you, and looking forward rather than backward, how much does it really help?

In our communities, I am heartened by the number of seniors who are still as active as they were when I revived my career as a journalist in 2009.

There is a saying that if you want something done you ask a busy person to do it ? and that's certainly exemplified by those volunteers who give of their time at our seniors' centres, service clubs, cultural organizations, to their neighbours, or within their retirement communities to make the world a better place.

They certainly put my energy levels to shame!

The same can be said for the equally tireless people who might not be old enough for their seniors' centre membership cards but still work their butts off to make opportunities for seniors to stay active, vital, interested and forward-thinking possible.

On this front, I would also like to give a shout-out to the younger peoples in our communities who have, whether it is through their schools, volunteer opportunities, or just interest, given of their time to teach seniors the ropes on their devices, on social media, and much more to facilitate these same opportunities. Those young'uns who do this have realized early on what many of us don't until it's too late ? that seniors, and the life-experiences they offer us, are valuable and irreplaceable community resources.

After last month's Emmy ceremony, I reminisced with a close friend about how drastically our perception of ?seniorhood? has evolved over the years.

We forged our friendship in a fan community in the reasonably early days of the internet and part of that entailed keeping track of the comings and goings of people associated with the fandom who were still with us. At the time, it seemed almost astounding that people in their late 70s and early 80s were still out and about and were even more astonished they were still getting work.

That was close to 25 years ago and, in retrospect, it's laughable that that was our attitude.

Then again, what it meant to be 80, 90, or even a centenarian in the late 1990s or the first years of the New Millennium seems like a totally foreign concept to our collective ideas of 2024.

As much as our world feels to be heading in the wrong direction these days, I'll say, on the subject of aging, this is one trajectory I think we can all celebrate. We're certainly the richer for it ? and the richer for all of you!