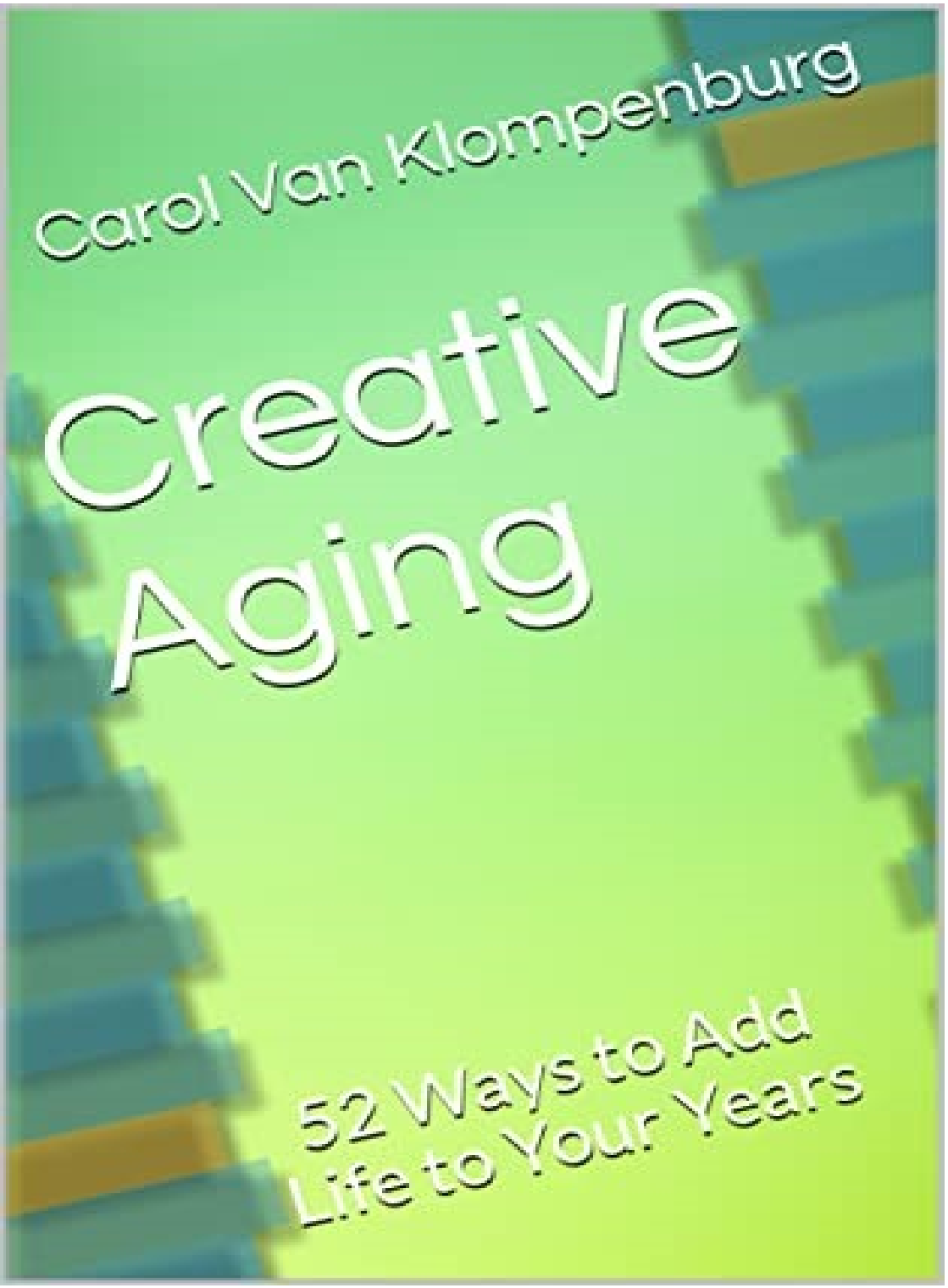
Carol Van Klompenburg
Creative Aging
52 Ways to Add Life to Your Years

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Dedication

To my late father, Henry Addink, and others of his generation who served as models for creative aging.

Contents

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1 Not Yet Old

Denial ain't just a river in Egypt. –Mark Twain

My first complimentary issue of *AARP The Magazine* arrived on my 50th birthday. *Why on earth is the American Association of Retired Persons sending this to ME?* I wondered. *I am at least 15 years from retirement. I'm definitely and solidly in midlife*.

I grumbled to my husband and tossed it into the recycling bin, unopened. Each month a new issue arrived. For a year, each issue suffered the same fate.

That was more than two decades ago. No matter which birthday I celebrated after that, I was sure old age still lurked 10 to 15 years down the road.

Age is just a number, I thought. *I am unusually healthy and very active for my stage of life.* I bought a pickleball racket and joined a local drop-in group, sure my tennis background qualified me to compete with women a decade or two younger than me.

Two years ago, I decided to research the aging process, to prepare for the future date in which I began to age. I was not yet old, but if I did the math, I could not deny that, even if I lived to be 100, I was in the final third of my life.

I googled aging, successful aging, senior living, healthy aging, and many more terms. I also googled

"best books on aging." I ordered interlibrary loan books, put e-books on my Kindle, and stacked paperbacks on my shelves. Some books depressed me; others encouraged me. In many forms, I confronted this fact: Aging is inevitable, and many people try to ignore the process.

Some books did imply you could reverse the aging process and seemingly live forever, or at least to a very, very, very old age. But those books didn't ring true for me. They were usually promoting some miracle product.

Muriel Gillick confronted those books and me. In *Denial of Aging,* she wrote, "We would like to think that if we eat nutritious meals and exercise faithfully, we will be able to fend off old age. When we believe we will stay young forever, and when we purchase special vitamins, herbs, and other youth-enhancing chemicals to promote longevity, we are engaging in massive denial."

I thought of the vegetarian diet I was experimenting with and the assorted capsules in my medicine cabinet. I was helping anti-aging products break sales records each consecutive year. In 2020, the global anti-aging market was estimated to be 58.5 billion US dollars, and it will likely see a compound annual growth rate of 7 percent between 2021 and 2026.

In my reading I learned 30 percent of Americans would rather not think about getting older at all. Their denial might arise from pride, embarrassment, fear, or depression. I learned most of us have a younger self-image than our actual age; we think everyone our age looks older than we do. I winced. Just the day before I had glimpsed a woman in a store window, wondered who that old woman was, and realized with a shock I was looking at my reflection.

I learned older adults tend to dissociate themselves from their peers when negative stereotypes become prominent. *Yes,* I thought, *I withdraw emotionally from*

conversations when peers begin their organ recitals of their latest medical complications.

The mass of evidence convinced me: I am an older person. It also convinced me "older" is a gentler way to describe my age than "old." I learned I would be guilty of ageism if I used the terms "elderly" or "over the hill." But that's a topic for another column.

Seeing myself as part of the older generation has been a paradigm shift for me. It's as if continental drift has happened overnight. The landmass of my youth has been split off from me, not over millions of years, but in an instant.

I am continuing my research. I want to know all I can about my current stage of life: how to enjoy the new freedoms, how to cope with the losses, how to find new sources of identity, etc.

As a lifelong writer, I have decided to do what I have always done with significant changes in my life: write about it. With that decision a book has been born: *Creative Aging.*

Together, in each chapter we will explore this new adolescence in which we ask ourselves who we will be as we grow older. We will journey through the ups and downs, the pluses and minuses of this new stage of life. We will look at how to successfully adapt to our changing selves. And we'll have the grace to laugh at ourselves along the way.

Welcome aboard!

2 On Memory Lane

You need three umbrellas: one to leave at a friend's house, one to leave at home, and one to leave everywhere else.

It happened again just last week. After an acquaintance had told me she enjoyed reading my memoir, *Child of the Plains,* she said, "I also enjoyed another book lately. It was written by—" and she paused.

"Oh, darn," she said, "I can't remember her name. She does the one-woman performances about Mareah Scholte, the wife of Pella's founder."

"Beverly Graves?" I asked.

"Yes, that's it!" she said. "This 83-year-old brain doesn't work so well."

She criticized her brain function, but it had worked on three out of four fronts. She remembered enjoying the book, she could describe the author, and she recognized the name when I said it. Three out of four isn't bad; it's like a batting average of 750.

She was simply having a moment when her brain synapses clicked into pause mode. And research reveals that pause mode already begins happening to people in their mid-thirties. It simply happens a bit more often to older people. I reassured her I sometimes have trouble remembering as well. "I have a

photographic memory," I told her. "But occasionally my camera lacks film."

Sociologists have made studies of brain-film effectiveness. One study showed complex pictures to both younger and older people and asked them for a narration about everything they saw. The older people made more mistakes in naming items as they narrated.

However, when asked simply to name each item in a series of one-item pictures, the older people did better than the younger ones. Semantic memory, our knowledge of words, numbers, and general concepts, improves with age.

Our procedural memory remains unchanged. So older adults can generally remember how to cook an omelet, tell time on a clock, tie a bow, or type as well as they ever could.

Some of our abilities remain strong, but they slow down. Older adults process information more slowly and require more repetition to learn something new. It also takes us more time to shift focus from one task to another. So, it is wise for us to stay focused on one task at a time rather than trying to multi-task.

One memory that declines with age is episodic memory—the what, where, and when of daily life. That memory decline is the reason I sometimes ask my husband to call my smartphone to help me find it. It is the reason I have difficulty recalling what I ate for lunch yesterday.

Our attitudes influence our memories. The more anxiety I experience when I try to remember a name, the further the name retreats. I have one friend who is good at saying calmly, "I'm drawing a blank on that right now. It will come to me later." Another friend says simply, "Hmm. I'm having a mental pause." And then my friends move on to another topic, or to telling the story they were going to tell, minus the name that momentarily disappeared. When I relax and move on,

often the name comes back to me when I am no longer trying to think of it.

One source of our anxiety is the worry we are developing dementia, a fairly widespread fear in later years according to psychologists. I comfort myself with a reminder, "Forgetting where I put my phone is normal. Forgetting what the phone is for is not." Statistics are in our favor. Fewer than one in five people over 65, and less than half of those over 85, have Alzheimer's disease. Besides, worrying about the future accomplishes nothing except to darken the present. (If you are forgetting how to do daily tasks or missing important appointments, though, you might want to consult with your physician.)

A positive attitude, instead of a negative one, allows us to master new skills. We CAN learn a new language; it simply requires a little additional time and repetition. We CAN learn acrylic painting, playing piano, or woodworking. We simply need to allow ourselves time to develop the skill. And retirement living allows us the luxury of extra time.

There are coping skills for some of the declines. When trying to remember a name, my husband cycles through the alphabet for a beginning letter that seems to belong with the missing name. Sometimes if he comes up with a first letter, I can retrieve the name. We joke that between the two of us we have a complete brain. However, when we get into our car, he has never said to me, "Okay, I will remember where we are going. You remember who we are."

Sometimes, when I walk into a room and can't remember what I went there for, I can retrieve the memory by returning to the room I started from. Sometimes that doesn't help, and I simply go on with life. If it was important, it will occur to me again. Simply going on is a healthier choice than being convinced for some reason I am going to find a clue in the refrigerator.

Older people also cope with misplaced items when we do what our grandmothers preached: establish a place for everything and put everything in its place. Marlo and I always park in the same section of the church parking lot. I have learned a fanny pack is wonderful for keeping track of my smart phone. (A belt clip or pocket would also work.) My keys have a permanent home in a zippered compartment of my purse.

Lest I forget to mention it, there are techniques for maintaining, and even improving memory. But that's a topic for another column.

And now if I could just remember where I put my glasses.

3 Discovering Ageism

I've learned that life is like a roll of toilet paper: The closer it gets to the end, the faster it goes. –Andy Rooney

Talk about getting old! I was getting dressed, and a Peeping Tom looked in the window, took a look—and pulled down the shade. –Joan Rivers

Let's begin with a question. I think one of the above jokes is ageist. Which one is it?

Another question first: What's ageism? Although the term was coined in 1968 by physician Robert Butler, I hadn't heard the term until I started researching aging a few years ago.

Ageism is a prejudice, like racism or sexism. According to Butler, it is a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old.

Which joke is ageist? Joan Rivers' joke depends on the stereotype that older people are unattractive.

I must admit, though, when I classify Joan Rivers' joke as ageist, a skeptic at the back of my brain thinks, *Give me a break. It's just a joke!*

But the experts tell me negative stereotypes are hurtful to older people. Our self-perceptions can be shaped by what we hear repeatedly. And a University

of Michigan National Poll revealed 82 percent of adults aged 50 to 80 experience one or more forms of ageism daily.

Ageism occurs in more than jokes. It happens in word choice and behaviors as well.

AARP The Magazine classified the following terms for older people as ageist: elderly, adorable, of a certain age, over the hill, blue-hairs, little old lady, old coot, geezer, fogey, codger, and even senior citizen.

Wait a minute, I thought when reading the list, *Senior Citizen is an ageist term? Why?* So, I dug deeper and learned the term "citizen" tends to be associated more with numbers than with humanity. *OK, I can see that. Sort of. But for me that is a bit of a stretch. To me the term just seems unnecessarily formal.*

My other response to the list was *Goodness*! *What terms CAN I use*? AARP had a list for that as well: older, experienced, wise, seasoned, sage, mature, perennial, ageless, vintage, and distinguished.

Hmm. Some of those terms work for me, and some seem a bit of a stretch. I can't see myself calling an older person perennial. To me that is a plant term for a flower that comes up year after year. And vintage is a term I reserve for clothing and antiques. Applied to people, these terms feel a bit clunky.

I decided I was most comfortable with the term "older people," and probably would likely use that most often.

I scanned the two lists again and realized I question some of the terms in both lists, but I do have a much more negative feeling about being an older person after reading the first list than the second one.

Sally Brown of the Vital Aging Network says some examples of ageist behavior and products are so common—and sometimes well-meaning—we might not even think of them as ageist:

- Birthday parties featuring black balloons and over-the-hill gifts. I think back to some over-the-

hill gift-giving. *Hmm. The laughter of the recipient of some of those gag gifts was sometimes embarrassed and nervous. It was not a pleasure-filled belly laugh.*

- Anti-aging products. *When I read ads for anti-aging products, I regard my maturity as something negative. As a result, I dislike what I see in the mirror.*
- Assuming young people are computer geniuses and older people are technologically inept. *When I assume my technology skills are lacking, I make it more difficult to master them. Not a good idea!*

As I researched ageism, I realized: *I am among the 36 percent of older people who have internalized ageist biases.*

I also realized: *I can change, but it will take time.*

What about you? Are you with me in discovering hidden ageist bias in yourself? Did you spot the ageism in the Joan Rivers joke? Would you like a second chance? Here are two more jokes.

When you are dissatisfied and would like to go back to youth, think of algebra. –Will Rogers.

Whatever you may look like, marry a man your own age. As your beauty fades, so will his eyesight. –Phyllis Diller.

May you identify and resist each ageist messages you see and hear!

4 On Bonding

There isn't time, so brief is life, for bickering, apologies, heart burnings, callings to account. There is only time for loving, and but an instant, so to speak, for that. –Mark Twain

Those who love deeply never grow old. They may die of old age, but they die young. –Benjamin Franklin

"She was sobbing, so I walked over to her and gave her a big hug," said Kathryn. She volunteers as a receptionist one day per week at an Iowa social service agency that offers help to people in hard places. "Now each week when she comes in, she talks with me before she goes to her counseling session."

Kathryn had begun a relationship. Her face was radiant as she told me the story. That new relationship brought her joy.

But good relationships—whether marital, family, or social—don't bring just joy. A Harvard Study tracked 724 men for 75 years and generated tens of thousands of pages of information. The study's clearest message: good relationships keep us happier and healthier.

The expanding field of neuroscience teaches us that people with social support generally have better mental

health, heart health, immune systems, and brain function.

In his book *Timeless,* psychology professor Louis Cozolino writes that our brains are social organs, and so we are wired to connect with others and be part of groups. We are like trees in a farm grove; we look like individual trees, but deep underground the roots that nourish and feed us are intertwined.

In the 1960s, researchers believed that social relationships become impaired and less satisfying with age. However, more recent research shows just the opposite. In general, older adults typically report higher levels of satisfaction with their social relationships than younger adults.

Our social circles may shrink a bit as some of our friends die or move away, but our networks are also smaller by our own choice. We may reduce contact with some acquaintances and maintain ties with closer friends and partners. We keep the relationships that are most rewarding. For close relationships, it is wise to show gratitude and never take those you love for granted.

While good relationships benefit our health, loneliness can be deadly. It increases mortality by 26 percent according to one study cited in *Perspectives in Psychological Science.* And more than one in five Americans is lonely at some point.

One explanation for the increased mortality among lonely people is that social relationships help reduce our stress and lower our level of the stress hormone cortisol, which is hard on our bodies and our emotions.

One transition that can produce loneliness is retirement, when you no longer see the same network of people at work every day. It takes effort to replace workmates with playmates. Other transitions, such as moving or a change in your physical status that limits

your participation in a previously enjoyed activity, can also produce loneliness. Or perhaps you are one of the world's introverts who doesn't build relationships easily. What can you do?

If you find yourself staring at the television more hours than is good for you, you may want to replace screen time with people time.

Volunteering, as my friend Kathryn did, is one way to build bonds with new people. Opportunities to volunteer abound: churches, schools, soup kitchens, libraries, rescue missions, thrift stores, and more.

Building a relationship with grandchildren or other youth can boost our morale. The bond between young and old is a special treasure. Colozino says, "We build the brains of our children through our interaction with them, and we keep our own brains growing and changing throughout life by staying connected with others."

It's also wise, at this stage of life, to establish a strong relationship with a good physician.

The bonds we establish can be with friends, family members, or spouses. What is critical is to have a network of loving relationships with people who are there for us when we need them.

As my friend Kathryn learned, relationships in which we provide support for others are some of the most rewarding bonds. I volunteer weekly at that same reception desk as Kathryn. I like the way Kathryn's face glowed when she talked about the new bond that had grown. In the future, I would like to be more sensitive to the needs of the clients I welcome. It just might contribute to their health—and mine.

5 Weathering Loss

You know you're getting older when you're told to slow down by your doctor, instead of by the police. —Joan Rivers

Although aging brings us new opportunities and insights, it also brings losses. And the list of those potential losses is discouragingly long. It includes loss of physical abilities, of property, of people and relationships, along with mental and emotional losses. And each of these categories has multiple examples.

That's the bad news. Here are the silver linings. Not all older people experience all possible kinds of loss. And losses don't come all at once; they often accumulate gradually. By the time we reach our senior years, we have probably had significant practice at coping with loss. When I married, I lost a certain independence. When I had infants and toddlers, I lost my weekends off. One loss was monumental: In 2017, my youngest son died of an opiate overdose.

Perhaps, remembering those past losses, we can gather strength to deal with life's current losses as well. Adjusting may require some grieving, but I have learned tears are the pressure valve that releases sadness, anxiety, and even fear. After sessions of tears over the loss of my son, I had more strength to walk through the next steps in a day. As months passed by,

I gradually learned that it is possible to be happy again, even after loss. Life did not need to be perfect to include joy. As Karl Pillemer said, "We learn to be happy in spite of, not happy if only."

If we allow it, pain can produce growth. It doesn't happen immediately. It doesn't justify the pain or make it go away, but it is growth nonetheless. Pain can soften our hearts and make us more sensitive to the sufferings of others. Pain can humble us so that we realize our need for others. Pain can make us vulnerable and open to being loved.

But pain and loss do not automatically produce growth. They can make us bitter or they can make us better. We have a choice. That principle is essential for Viktor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning*.

Frankl did not just spin theory. He lived with great loss as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. His mother, father, brother, and wife all died in the camps. His captors took from him almost every element of personal value and human dignity.

The only thing they were not able to take was his choice of how to respond. He described that response as "the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

Chronic pain treatment focuses on the difference between pain and suffering. Some pain is unavoidable, but suffering can be avoided. Suffering occurs when we think *Why me? This is more than I can bear. This is terrible.* We can make the choice not to suffer. We can radically accept the life we are given.

Six years ago, when I discussed my son's addictions with my therapist, she asked me, "If the worst possible thing happened, could you survive?"

I paused for a long time and said slowly, "I think I could. It would hurt like hell, but I think I could." I had survived giving birth to a stillborn son, and eventually found joy in spite of loss. I trusted I would

be given strength to survive whatever pain the future might hold. Over time I did receive that strength.

Mary Pipher says in *Women Rowing North*, "Great personal suffering can sometimes deepen our souls to the point they crack open and let in great beauty."

She says that when our hearts crack open, we identify with all who have suffered, and we pray not only for ourselves but for everyone who has suffered. She adds that happiness doesn't happen because we are problem-free but because we have learned to be present to the moment.

She concludes, "Yet, in spite of our situations, whatever they are, we all can have our days when we feel like a three-legged cat, drenched in sunlight."

As we age, we may be like three-legged cats, but we can take pleasure in the warmth and beauty of the sun.

6 The Good Old Days

My grandfather is always saying that in the old days people could leave their back doors open. Which is probably why his submarine sank. –Milton Jones, Comedian

It happened again last week. I was part of a group of older people who began to reminisce about their childhoods. The conversation turned to party-line telephones and people who rubbernecked. (They listened in on other people's conversations.) It included recalling what your particular ring was: one-long-and-two-shorts or short-long-short or some other long-short ring combination. Your phone rang whenever someone on your party line was being called, and you knew if it was for you by distinguishing the longs and the shorts. They talked about how the world had changed—to private lines with cordless phones, then cell phones, and then smartphones.

I was part of that group, but I said nothing. I thought—somewhat judgmentally I confess—that we were sounding like a bunch of old fogies. (Yes, I used that ageist term. Sorry.)

On our daily walks, when my husband sometimes reminisces about his childhood Go-Kart or his Doodlebug mini-bike, I listen, but I do not chime in with my own memories of playing Kick the Can or

Eenie Einie Over.

Increasingly, my peers have been reminiscing, while I listen—and sometimes judge.

Should I? When my father was in his final months, the hospice social workers sometimes asked him about his past, encouraging him to reminisce.

I googled "reminiscing" and was surprised by what I learned.

I learned that we start reminiscing around age 10. Young people and older people reminisce more than people at midlife, perhaps because midlife people tend to have less discretionary time.

I discovered that perhaps my negative attitude was out of date. In the early 1900s, reminiscing by older people was disparaged as an unhealthy dysfunction. Then in 1963, aging expert Robert Butler maintained that reminiscing was universal and natural—and could be positive. He called it "life review."

I found post-1963 articles that were over-the-top in their praise of reminiscing: They said it preserves family history, improves quality of life, reduces depression, promotes physical health, eliminates boredom, improves communication skills, reduces stress, enhances self-esteem, and more.

But still I wondered, remembering times when my older relatives angrily rehearsed old hurts. Is all reminiscing good? Then I found a balanced viewpoint that rang true for me. In the 1990s, psychologists Lisa Watt and Paul Wong classified different types of reminiscing.

- Obsessive: "Everything was terrible."
- Escapist: "Those were the glory days."
- Narrative: "This is what happened."
- Transmissive: "When I was your age. . ."
- Instrumental: "I conquered hardship. I can do it again."
- Integrative: "My life had worth."

They then evaluated the effect of each kind of reminiscing and found different effects.

- Obsessive: When we remember how awful some events were and stay stuck there, we fail to incorporate them into a meaningful life and feel bad all over again.
- Escapist: Although it can defend our egos, remembering the good old days as better than the present is generally not healthy. It can reduce satisfaction with our current life.
- Narrative: Watt and Wong reached no conclusions about the positive or negative effect of our telling a story about the past factually without coloring or interpreting it.
- Instrumental: When we tell a story of surviving hardship in the past, we enhance our feelings of strength and competence. These stories include achieving goals despite barriers, and we draw from them to overcome present problems.
- Integrative: When I review the story of my life and evaluate it as having value, I feel good about myself. These stories can include reconciling the difference between the ideal and reality, accepting negative life events, and resolving old conflicts.

Watt and Wong convinced me that some kinds of reminiscing are indeed good. And, though I fall silent when a group starts reminiscing, I do reminisce in other ways—and some of it has been good for me. After I had written *Child of the Plains: A Memoir,* I found, to my surprise that I had made peace with some painful experiences of my childhood. When my grandchildren ask for an old-days bedtime story, and I tell them about being a five-year-old afraid to ride on a different school bus seat from my brother but doing it anyway, I feel good afterwards.

I have begun work writing for my heirs the stories of

the mementos and artwork around my house. I am realizing through that process that also in my adult life are stories I find worth sharing.

My friends' conversation about party-line phones was not escapist. They weren't reliving glory days. They were simply narrating stories about the way things used to be different.

Maybe, just maybe, when the reminiscing is not escapist or obsessive, I can find a good story to share the next time a group of my friends begins to reminisce.