

# I'm in denial, but aging is a game I'm still trying to win

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ILLUSTRATION BY MARLEY ALLEN-ASH

“You don’t have to line up, sir,” says the VIA rail attendant. “You can wait here at the head of the line.”

“Really? Why?”

“It’s for people who need assistance boarding. Families with small children and ...”

He’s going to say it. I know he’s going to say it.

“... seniors.”

As we board comfortably ahead of everyone else, I say to my wife, who is much more sanguine about accepting our status than I am: “Is it really that obvious?”

“Yes, dear. It’s that obvious.”

But do I have to like it?

I don’t feel like a senior. I still feel, well, maybe not young, but certainly not old. Let’s say – middling? Alas, my appearance says otherwise.

The fact is I really don’t like the whole concept of “senior.” It suggests early bird dinners at 4:30 and lawn bowling and walking sticks and places called “senior centres.”

I know that there’s a senior centre in Kingston. I’m sure it’s a perfectly fine place. They offer a wealth of classes and programs. I just have no interest in taking rug hooking or line dancing. At least not yet. Maybe if they changed the name to, say, the “Lots of Interesting Stuff for People of All Ages Centre” they might lure me in. Or not.

My mother also hated to admit her age. Only when I read my grandfather’s diaries did I discover that she was born in 1915 not 1916. Mom moved into a retirement complex when she was close to 90, but she dismissed the identical building next door as the “seniors’ residence.” Hers was just an “apartment.” So if I have a denial problem I learned it at my mother’s knee.

Not that long ago, at the ticket wicket of our local cinema, they used to ask: “One senior?” I’d prevaricate or make some stupid crack: “Do I look like a senior?” But I’d end up taking the cheaper price.

Now no one even asks. I guess it’s that obvious.

I’m not a puritan about this. If someone offers me a discount, I shut up and take it. But unless there’s some tangible, i.e., monetary, benefit to my senior status, I do my best to ignore it and sometimes make symbolic little shows of resistance.

“Would you like a carry out, sir?” asks the clerk at the liquor store as she packs up a box of wine. I have a stock response: “No thanks. If I can’t carry it, I shouldn’t be drinking it.” This usually gets a smile and preserves my dignity.

Although I know aging is a game where the house always wins in the end, I do try to exercise and keep my body functioning so I can at least carry what I drink.

I expect you've heard that, as you get older, you should walk 10,000 steps a day. But where does this number come from?

I Googled it and scrolled through topics like "Aging Better in Uncertain Times" and "Seven Soup Recipes for Seniors." (Do seniors really need special "senior soup"? I hope the senior centre café is on to that.) Eventually, I came across an article about the "10,000 Steps Myth." It claimed that the requirement originated as a marketing ploy for a Japanese pedometer called Manpo-kei, which means – you guessed it – "10,000 Step Meter" and has no scientific basis.

I'm relieved because I've discovered that 10,000 is a heck of a lot of steps. My go-to walking spot is Fort Henry hill in Kingston. There are beautiful sunsets and a big enough hill that my exercise can be termed a hike rather than a walk.

Which brings me to an admission. I do own walking sticks, or as I prefer to call them: "hiking poles." I don't like being seen with them, but I see others puffing up Fort Henry hill using them which eases the stigma. A bit.

The first time I tackled the hill I was sure I'd done a good 10,000 steps. But when I checked my phone, prepared to bask in my accomplishment, the step count read a measly 3,827. Really? Since then I've lengthened my route, but I've barely cracked 5,000 steps. Maybe there's something wrong with my phone.

One day at Fort Henry, a woman called out: "Young man!" Is she talking to me? "Young man! Can I take your picture?" I can't imagine why, but she did call me "young man," so why not? Then she deflates the moment as I walk away by calling out: "Young man! Be careful! Don't fall!"

Do I really look that doddering?

Last winter I did fall cross country skiing. It was on a piddling hill, but one ski got twisted under me and caught in a bush beside the trail. I flopped around awkwardly trying to untangle myself.

I was blocking the trail and was soon surrounded by half a dozen skiers, all looking concerned – far more concerned than the situation merited.

"Did you fall?" a woman asks.

Embarrassed at my awkwardness, I got a bit testy. "I'm okay. Please. Just carry on."

Then another skier and his son: "Are you all right, sir?"

"I'm FINE!!"

The father said to his son: "We just want to make sure he's all right ... He's a senior."

Is there no end to these indignities?

So, to sum up, the tricks I've learned to combat one's creeping decrepitude: Cross country ski and don't fall, walk as many steps as you can and carry your own wine to the car.

And, since there's no shame in it, maybe just accept your seniority, hiking poles and all, and the wisdom that supposedly comes with it. And the next time the liquor store clerk offers me a carry out, I might just take her up on it.

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