

Childlike, Not Childish

Maggie Smith



Three floors up, Frank and I sat on our apartment balcony one early morning, blowing bubbles — huge, soapy bubbles that rose and fell like floating balloons. We were trying out a new, round wire contraption Frank had fashioned for the grandchildren. Having a dandy time. Below, people went to work, and we watched them from our perch, as we often did. How marvelous that we no longer had to go to work — in the conventional way.

“You old codgers having a good time up there?” a well-dressed, middle-aged man called to us.

I looked at Frank. “He thinks we’re childish!” I gasped in mock amazement.

“We’re not childish,” he said gently. “We are child-like. There’s a big difference.”

As a couple of retired Americans approaching eighty, Frank and I are detached from our former life. Once you realize you are old, it is almost like having your house burn down, taking in flames your valued possessions. Suddenly you are given the opportunity to look forward to the next house you’ll occupy — free to begin again.

When we become consciously old, we are like children moving into a new neighborhood. At first we stand back and watch. All that activity, all those games being played. If we aren’t invited to participate, we have to plunge in. We linger in the paths we knew as children, yet we are developed to go beyond those paths. When very young we enjoyed what was within the range of our vision, sounds, and senses. In retirement we are free to return to that situation, only with a sharpened awareness. With at least 112 hours a week of do-what-

Three days after Frank’s death, KSL-TV, where Maggie had been a legend before her retirement, called again. Would she? She would. Now she is on Monday’s noon news with a “Good Friends” feature, chatting over the fence of a home in the Marmalade District about interesting people and places. On Friday’s she’s on-camera in the kitchen cooking. “Suicide Fudge” is one of her favorites.

we-want-to-do time, we older ones can take up where we left off in childhood, only better equipped. So becoming child-like is important; recapturing long-ago attitudes and habits, expecting surprises, accepting surprises.

There's time now to take a long, fresh look at every day. Time to discover the extraordinary in the commonplace. Time to develop affection for what we used to quickly bypass. Trees and birds. We've always had bird feeders but small time to watch the birds. Now we have time. We've always heard no two snowflakes are alike. Now we look at them under a magnifying glass. It's true! Our curiosity never ages. At the beginning of each day we are practically overcome at the possible adventures that await us. We respond to anything that catches our eyes. Just as children do. . . .

Frank and I are enchanted by morning mists, landscapes blurred by rain and fog. Every view in early morning is spectacularly glorious. For fifteen cents we can travel on our city bus line for miles and miles around our lovely city. Imagine being able to ride in comfort to the country any time you want for only fifteen cents. Some days we sit on a mountainside and gaze at the great heights and distances, grateful to the inventor and manufacturer who was smart enough to make our spectacles so we can see clearly in our old age. If a country friend offers the loan of a couple of horses, we see the landscape from the back of a horse. We love the constantly changing scene from horse-back, car, bus, or train window.

We love to study swallows and the sky games they play in the evening, going to different areas of the sky and regrouping for their carefully plotted stunts. One of our next projects is to save up and join the town Audubon Society chapter. We envision groups of people taking nature walks, knowing what they are looking for and what they are looking at!

We adore marches. We put a good rousing march on the record player every morning. Usually we have a lively dance. If you're grateful to be alive and moving, it is possible to dance to Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever." We love Simon and Garfunkel's "Cecilia," but Sousa is more in harmony with my husband's artificial foot.

We play dominoes and Chinese checkers, go to fairs, auctions, and church suppers. Whenever we find ourselves under country trees, Frank sets up a dart game. He likes archery and horseshoe pitching with his cronies. We walk in blizzards and hailstorms and go barefoot in the mud after soaking rains. If we can get to Heber City (fifty miles away) in the wintertime, we go to dogsled races and chariot races, cheering but not participating! And once a year we try to ride on the Heber Creeper, an antique train with a beautiful, lonesome whistle as it crawls through the meadows of Heber Valley. I would like to ice skate and roller skate, but Frank forbids it. He's afraid we'll break our legs. We didn't ice skate or roller skate when we were young, either. He was afraid then, too, that we'd break our legs.

We guard and treasure our library cards the way we used to guard credit cards. We read aloud to each other. In our quavery voices (in private mostly, since both are tone-deaf), we sing together. We visit art exhibits (our town abounds in art galleries). We attend Shakespearean productions and musical



concerts in the parks during the summer evenings (all free). We go to live theater and special movies every chance we get.

We belong to an Icicle Club, which means that as appreciators of beautifully formed icicles we tour the city seeking out the icicles at the eaves of houses and buildings. We belong to the Hot Fudge Sundae Club. We have fritter fries and pancake breakfasts and big pie celebrations. When some of our friends at the far edge of town raised a pig on table scraps, we had a Pig Roasting Party. That was a grand day! So long as we have our curiosity and our senses, we can make the best of all days.

During the summer months, Frank and I make arrangements to go the following morning and walk in various townspeople's flower gardens. People never seem to mind looking down from their bedrooms a little after dawn and seeing a couple of old ones admiring their garden. (Especially if the visitors have the habit of leaving a box of homemade doughnuts on the gardener's doorstep!)

We belong to the Shade Tree Club, the members mostly aged and retired. (There are so many funerals of members lately that Frank and I often find ourselves the only remaining members.) We intimately know all the trees in our area and make regular visits to them, sketching and studying. Townspeople no longer seem surprised to look out and see us sprawled beneath their beautiful trees, looking intently upward. In time, we hope to find more and more appreciators lying supine and studying from that angle what they may

have never noticed, watching from underneath as the wind flutters the leaves in the top of the tree, while the lower leaves remain motionless. What pleasure!

Few of these enchantments take much money, merely time. And we have time. Nothing seems closed to us, except pregnancy and routine salaried work.

Frank and I always have something to talk about with each other. Often we spend a complete breakfast conversation discussing a current magazine cover. Long ago we developed the notebook habit of jotting down our observations and impressions as we went through the days and later discussing them.

We don't allow much time recalling the past. Too many melancholy sighs in it. The great and the good. The bad and uncomfortable. Let it go! We won't be going that way again. We are on our way to *new* experiences. We can't and don't want to go back. Nor do we try to act or dress younger than we are. Sidestepping both of these tendencies, we save much time that can be spent in much more pleasurable ways.

No one can hurt our feelings because we know we haven't time left for hurt feelings. No one can really disappoint us. We merely turn to doing something else. We edge away from negative people. We are quick to forgive grievances. We have a merry detachment from the unpleasant.

Thank goodness, our minds and bodies serve us well. Gratefully, when ailments develop, the miracles of medical science have been available. We have known for a long time that Frank has a service-connected brain damage; but through the excellent medical assistance of the Veteran's Administration, we have been able to cope with this condition. We figure we have ten years left and would dearly love to see the year 2000 together but know that isn't realistic.

Frank and I are lucky that we are congenial. We know that so long as we both live, we'll each have a good playmate. Having been together so long, we are tolerant of each other's annoyances. I keep bananas under my pillow for midnight snacking. They mellow well there. Frank sometimes sits on the side of the bed and munches crackers and cheddar. More crackers in the bed than out. But no matter — to either one.

We love our children and they love us. They have lively mates. They are all in nests of their own, self-sufficient and happy. We have nine grandsons and nine granddaughters. They come often and we go often. When children visit we invite them to sing. Surprising, the many songs children know but seldom sing aloud unless they are asked.

After a long life of raising a family and doing pleasant work that we enjoyed, we have few worldly possessions. Our clothing and accessories, Frank's art equipment, my typewriter, an old Seth Thomas clock that has been ticking our days away since our marriage so long ago, a few sticks of solid furniture, and four traveling bags. That's about it. With those items and our monthly Social Security checks, Frank and I manage nicely.

Our life is geared to the simplicity of keeping ourselves housed, clothed, and fed, thoroughly entertained and enchanted. We eat well but not elaborately. Our food bill is usually \$200 a month (steadily climbing). Near the end of the month we've never had to cut to graham crackers and milk but we

have had some grand meals of steamed bread, butter, and honey, or a baked fish (locally caught), a piece of fresh fruit, and eight glasses of water. We conserve and enjoy. We know all about simplicities, but every meal is a good memory. We try to be actually hungry before dining. During warm weather we eat every meal possible out-of-doors, sweeping our eyes around and enjoying the sights.

We claim we are happy. Frank and I have heard that being in a state of happiness means going to sleep as soon as your head touches the pillow, sleeping soundly for eight hours, then being so eager to get up and start the day the minute your eyes fly open that you immediately put your feet on the floor. Well, if that is a happiness test, that's us!

10 December 1981. A dreadful specter entered our life. Frank's brain damage evidently resulted in Parkinson's disease. He entered the Veteran's Hospital and from there went to a nursing home. The usual Parkinson's disease symptoms began characterized by tremor, rigidity of limbs, bowed posture, and loss of speech. Now, twice a day, Frank is put into a wheelchair for thirty minutes at a time. Otherwise he is in bed. When he opens his blue eyes, that I have loved for so long, I sense that his mind is far away. I can only hope that enough scenes and experiences have been etched there in his eighty-two years to comfort and delight him.

24 January 1984. I knew if the event didn't happen while I sat by his bedside, the message would come at some time of day or night. The nurse, by phone, merely said, "Mr. Smith left us at 5:15 P.M." I sat and stared for a long time. How could he be content if I wasn't there?