

Aging in Place: What's Fun?

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A number of people suggested that I write something about having fun. Many of my articles are about hard issues so this “fun” topic should have been a shift to something less weighty. It didn’t turn out that way. I don’t think I’m a downer-type person but thinking about fun was perplexing, and loaded with unexpected emotion. After many months, I figured out my two main quandaries: not knowing what fun was for me; and not understanding my reactions when someone asked me what I was doing for fun.

For the first question—what is fun?—I began in my usual way—with the dictionary. One definition says it is “enjoyment, amusement, or lighthearted pleasure.” OK, there are many things that I enjoy, amuse me, and in which I take pleasure. I’m fine with these ideas. But I have a little problem with the notion of “lighthearted.” When I think of lighthearted the image that pops into my head is my junior prom dress—sweet, puffy, and aqua. I really loved that dress and still have a picture of me in it. I don’t remember much about the prom but I do remember having “lighthearted” feelings about the dress. That was close to 60 years ago. The dress is gone, but I’m still here having accomplished a great deal since then. That lighthearted feeling may have been “fun” but it wasn’t something that contributed greatly to my life over time. So, a partial answer to the meaning of fun for me is that lightheartedness is good, but not as a stand-alone goal.

This sent me on a quest to figure out what fun is for me. I did this partly to convince myself that I am not an anomaly—a funless person. Also, I wanted to find a reasonable answer in response to questions about what I did for fun—one that was to the point and convincing. To do this, I spent a lot of time talking to myself. No one but me knows how long and convoluted these inner discussions were.

Perhaps my idea of fun has changed over the years, but I’ve had difficulty figuring out how. I was never a big party-person, although I loved being with people having a good time, sharing common experiences, singing, dancing, and laughing at jokes that, at least we who were in the room, thought were funny. I still do these things. What else has been fun for me? I love to travel to uncommon places. Those trips have been and will, I hope, continue to be fantastic. Going back to school was wonderful. It was hard work but I loved it (except statistics). We all agonized over the drudgery but had tremendous fun during our summer-session, Hawaiian-inspired, grass-skirted parties. I had a lot of fun with my kids when they were growing up (and still do), and now with my grandkids. I love going to theater, movies, opera, museums, or dinner with friends, but also like doing these things by myself. Right now a lot of my fun revolves around writing. It’s great when people tell me my articles hit home for them – it is enormously gratifying.

The other part of this “fun” thing is my reaction when asked what I do for fun. I feel guilty and oddly defensive like I am supposed to be doing something more or better than what I already am. The question implies that there is some kind of lack in my life. I immediately begin to search my brain for an answer but I get stuck right off the bat feeling bad and guilty. I don’t have a good response. This is probably because I hadn’t, up until now, defined what “fun” meant for me. I have a better idea now.

My conclusion is that the abstract notion of fun doesn't have a lot of meaning. For me, fun must be embedded in a context of learning, communicating, contributing, or creating—my regular life. It is being with people I care about—sharing laughter, and, when necessary, sadness. It is being challenged. It is about seeing something work when it wasn't working before. This is my fun and it works for me. Sometimes there is even lightheartedness—as in tropical island-themed revelries.

So, I have explained it to myself, but what do I say to others without getting defensive? I guess the simplest thing to say is "I am having fun with everything that I am doing." They may not understand but I do, and that is really what matters most.

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