

# VENAGE

## Introduction

I am now old! I turned ninety last year and recognize the fact that I'm no longer elderly, I'm OLD! But old is a negative word and so I have invented a new, more positive word for old, elderly, senior, or other words for ancient. My new word is *venage*. It is derived from two positive words, *venerable* and *sage*; I cut them in half, put the halves together, and voila...*venage* (with the accent on the last syllable). So, now I'm *venage*, venerable and sage; positively old!

But what do I do with the reality of my aging (aside from finding new words)? Do I fight it or accept it?

Well, being a lifelong teacher and learner, I have been studying the aging process for about five years. I've read up on it and talked to a lot of people about their experience. I have acquired a slew of quotations, references and interviews.

And I've heard a lot of complaints! Most people of a given age don't want to be 'old', yet they don't want to die (talk about being stuck between a rock and a hard place). During interviews, this comparison is almost always made: 'when I was younger I could do this or that', but 'now I can hardly do anything!' The negative predominates. I often hear this one: 'my children hardly ever call me!' In other words, happiness is rare, delight even more rare, and complaints common.

Sally Field said, "We stay who we are no matter how old we get!" If that's true, then a lot of younger people are living unhappy lives. I hope not. Thoreau famously said, "most people lead lives of quiet desperation," but I don't think that's true. Much of life is spent being hopeful, busy, engaged with family, friends, work, travel—in other words, living loud.

But serious aging changes everything. Life becomes much quieter when your hearing goes. Arthritis makes waking up a careful ritual, spurred by a need to get to the bathroom quickly! Most of all, life slows down. Only one or two things can be done each day (if you're lucky).

But that doesn't mean you need to become an old fossilized fart! T.S. Eliot said, "I don't believe one grows older, I think that what happens early in life is that at a certain age, one stands still and stagnates." But who wants to become a forgotten leftover turning moldy in the frig? There must be a better way to age.

What's a body to do! You can't go backwards, and if you could, what age would you choose? Still, you do have choices, if nature has acted kindly and you are physically able to move, at least some extent, and mentally unimpaired, at least within the usual memory loss.

Where will you live? Very few of those I interviewed were content. Independent living places, or being able to stay in your home, seem to offer the most pleasure, if you don't need extra assistance. There are an increasing number of organizations helping those who wish to stay at their home. There are assisted living places, and there is family. The choice is up to you and your family; take your time. The more questions you ask the more you learn. I don't know about you but the decision for me was tough. I enjoyed my own little apartment; for many years, I couldn't imagine living anywhere else. And then it happened...I had a heart attack and knew I could no longer handle the stairs, and a decision had to be made. Fortunately, I have a son who could accommodate my needs without upsetting his and his wife's lifestyle. I moved after a lengthy while, and all's well. He is a priest of the local Episcopal Church and he and his wife do not live in the rectory. They have a separate house which they built some time ago. You might say it is ideal, and I feel blessed.

But it is still a big change—and I'll talk more about getting used to being the guest of the house! But as physical capacities diminish, and new living accommodations are made, the big questions remain: Where do I find happiness? Where did pleasures go? Or, maybe a better question, what pleasures remain? They are still there, you just have to make a few changes. So for now just love, live and stir the damn pot!

To stir the pot, I developed **five rules**. Unfortunately they are not wry nor witty as the ones Roger Rosenblatt presented in his "Rules of Aging," but they are of substance. No matter your condition or age, you can use them. It's up to the user the success you'll achieve, but keep trying. The rules are:

1. Accept your venage (elderhood, old age)
2. Use your imagination
3. Be flexible with time and plans
4. Have a sense of humor! Engage in raillery
5. Adapt with grace

"Nothing else is required of the reader but a willingness to change one's entire way of looking at things" (Roger Rosenblatt).

## **CHAPTER I      ACCEPT**

When you realize that you have reached venage, limitations no longer whisper, they shout and will not be denied. Still, as I said, you do have choices. You can pretend and become a youth-follower, age-denier (fool); or one can accept the fact and act accordingly (sage).

So first, get real. "Our thoughts and feelings about aging may rise and fall, come and go, but the way we actually age is simply one breath at a time." (*Aging as a Spiritual Practice*, by Lewis Richmond). As long as you're breathing, you're aging.

If you choose the youth-follower path, you will be consumed by 'keeping up.' The hair-dresser gets busy: grey is out and coloring is in. Plastic surgery comes into play, expensive play. Not only are you spending money but time. Not only are you busy with youthful appearances but also keeping up with youthful activities. Ah! Now here is the rub...how's your endurance? And how long can one pretend!

Acceptance means release from trying to keep up to an ever more difficult standard. Acceptance allows you to look elsewhere for self-affirmation and enjoyment. As Bob Dylan, now elder sage not youthful prophet, recently said, "passion is a young man's game. Older people gotta be more wise, Don't try to act like you're young, you could hurt yourself."

If you accept that you are old and will only get older, until you die...well, how do you want to live? You've accepted the fact of physical limitations, what's left? Time, and your imagination! The old Stoic philosophers knew about enduring turns of fortune and getting old. Cicero wisely counseled, "live long and live slowly; calm and freedom arrive when passions relax their hold." Daniel Klein writes, "Epicurus was convinced that mental pleasures surpass physical pleasures." (*Travels with Epicurus*). At least they do when you've reached venage!

Relax, be yourself. There's no rush, so take your time, and think. In a reversal of the usual way of looking at aging, time is your ally, and loss of easy mobility becomes a spur to reflective living. What we used to do unconsciously we must now do consciously. Great! We can now take time to observe, study, enjoy the little things.

Here's an example. I have developed a relationship with a little sparrow. He appears each morning around the same time and putters about outside my window. One morning while puttering he tugged on what appeared to be a worm but turned out to be a string. Next another, smaller sparrow fluttered in, puttered around, pecked for a spell, and then flew away. In the meantime, the larger sparrow took the string, flew to a bush and disappeared. So what's this all about? I don't know. Bird watching?—not for me. I have only noticed birds casually and preferably from a distance. But this occasion happened quite close; I think the bird and I exchanged glances. Since what I know about building nests is next to nothing... I looked up 'what sex builds the nest?' Well, the male does! Building the nest is his way of courting his future mate. My curiosity was piqued and starting my morning with this new adventure made my day. The temper of my mind became one of wondering...what more will I see, observe today? This one episode began a routine and each morning I anticipated meeting up with the bird. Since then I have watched him add to the nest. As the poet Mary Oliver noted, 'pay attention and wonder!'

Since I have accepted the fact that I'm old and definitely have physical limitations, it has dawned on me, there are no limits on your mind! You have time, use it to enjoy, to learn, and realize that there's no one looking over your shoulder telling you what to do. You are free to decide how you'll fill your time. If you get bored remember it will be your own damn fault! As for me, and knowing that my memory sometimes betrays me, I began

jotting down bits and pieces of happenings. Before I knew it, I realized I wanted to write a book about how it feels to grow old, better yet, how it feels to come into one's venage. And the first rule I came up with: Accept your venage! Take time to look, hear, touch and swallow. What we used to do unconsciously we now do consciously. Savor the moment and ponder the results.

## **Chapter 2                      USE YOUR IMAGINATION**

You've retired from the rat race, put down the burdens of raising a family. Perhaps you are still working, but the hours are shorter and you're not sweating the small stuff. You've accepted venage, you are no longer a youth worshiper, you are going to be you. Now, who are you? and who might you become in this new part of your life?

Judi Dench is one of my heroes. She told a reporter, "I try to stave off the ravages of old age with learning something new everyday, take supplements to ward off memory loss, and make my own mistakes." Mistakes are great. They show that you are trying new things. Start thinking of what you can do and not what you can't do. Can't remember things you used to know? Remember, this "Imagination is more important than knowledge." (Einstein) Will you create or finish projects long put on the back burner? You can work on them a little at a time now. Or, take a deep breath and watch the sunset. What a daily inspiration. Especially because it's right around cocktail hour.

Are you a participator or an observer? Perhaps, like me, you like to be part of every conversation, but can no longer hear clearly in a crowd. It is embarrassing to speak off topic. It can be excruciating to follow someone's words while their head turns, and I can lose my temper with people who don't ENUNCIATE (especially my sons!). But then I realize, I have a different choice. I can relax and simply be an observer. Although I have always enjoyed being the life of the party, now I have to sit in a corner and watch others party. But guess what? One by one, people will drift over and engage me in conversation.

"Age is a mind over matter.....if you don't mind it, it doesn't matter!" (Mark Twain)

How does one not mind it? Listen to advice, mingle with others, learn something you you've not done before, volunteer. It is a time of freedom. Explore interests buried for years. Take a walk and smile at strangers. Fall in love with the NOW. Yesterday is over, tomorrow isn't here, today is now, enjoy!

Communicate with interesting words. Take a page out of Chesterfield and Samuel Johnson..."Words are the signs of ideas. Words are the dress of thoughts which should no more be presented in rags, tatters and dirt than your person should."

While we're on the subject of words and your imagination is in full play, here's a thought...write your memoirs. Put your imagination in the fast lane and get a peek at the virtues of venage! You're refusing to see a limited horizon; instead, the avenues of time open up for you to wander.

The effects of aging physically are vivid to us, but what happens to us mentally? Depression often enters the fray when you must adjust to not being the center of the universe. When your children feel you are safe, and it looks like you are pursuing acceptance and finding new hobbies, they just might sit back, relax and not call! Don't complain just to increase communication. You call them! You invite them. You learn to TEXT. This is especially satisfying with your grandchildren, short, sweet and to the point. And more than not they will respond. You can always ask them how their parents are!

To defeat a pound of depression, add an ounce of humor to your conversational exchanges. Especially when someone asks how you are. No one really wants to know about your ailments (I don't!); people are just being polite, asking a common, boring question. Make your answer uncommon, make it new, make it humorous. Raillery (light bantering humor) adds to the pleasure of conversation and life; complaining subtracts. Feel free to exaggerate, tell a slight untruth, use profanity with finesse (this is an art in and of itself worth exploring, especially as an older woman!).

Other avenues of interest are books. Catch up on your reading. Card games, board games; I fill time with solitaire on my iPad. You no longer have to always be "on." Nap frequently. Move from a serious book to a frivolous one (I like Judith McNaught). It's your time, your mind, your imagination. Stretch them. Venture to learn new words of interest. Think of something you've always wanted to do but never had the time.

And sometimes you might find yourself doing something you never ever thought of doing. If you are a man, have you ever tried knitting? Back when he was alive, and we were sitting down together, I was knitting, and my husband decided to try it. To his surprise, the activity calmed him down and produced a result he liked. The next thing he tried was pottery and the next thing I found he was hardly ever home! You can always initiate an interest group, perhaps a conversation group on interesting topics. And to think there's only 24 hours in a day! You can always volunteer...use your imagination with efficacy and panache!

Michael Kinsley, author of "Old Age," suggests that "what you really want is long years with a good attitude, not long years just breathing in and out." Use your imagination.

## **Chapter 3      BE FLEXIBLE**

What is meant by she/he acts old? 'Act your age' is often heard from parent to child. I guess every age has a stereotypical image, and "old people" are expected to act a certain way. Part of why the word "old" has a negative ring is because most people (and not just young people) expect old people to complain, be rigid in routine, and talk too

much about themselves, telling the same old stories over and over. In other words, an old person is expected to be boring and inflexible.

People expect you to be what you were, only less so. The cast was made long ago, and the mould broken. You are what you are, only with age the marble is chipped and the chair leg broken. The only changes are losses. Frustration rears its ugly head when independence is threatened or diminished.

But not you! You are not a stereotype, you are a unique human person with a complex and rich history, and a store of knowledge and wisdom. Being of a positive nature, you adjust. You use your imagination and follow your natural instinct to play and wonder.

Until it is time for Jeopardy. Then, God forbid someone wants to make a dinner date with you. You are inflexible. You are cranky. You are old.

Get over it! Your routine can be interrupted, even if it means your comfort zone gets rumpled a bit. With acceptance and realization of limitations, agree to do things that might be new, challenging and interesting. And—this is an absolute necessity—keep your sense of humor! Laugh at yourself, enjoy the simple things, see the delight in day-dreaming. If remembering seems to be elusive, do as the Japanese do, always have a pad and pen available for notes. It is considered a compliment. You never know but you might start a trend. Buy travel DVDs and take a video trip. Bon Voyage! Combined with imagination and flexibility the sky's the limit, and you haven't left the comforts of home.

Experiment. I used to wonder why so many older people like to sit on a bench facing the street in town; it seemed boring. But then I did just that as an experiment. I took a pad and pencil and watched the people walk by, or stand and talk in small groups. With thoughts on their mind and tasks on their "to do" list, they rarely noticed me. Then a person sat down and asked me what I was writing. A lovely conversation took place and before I knew it someone else stopped by and we had a party. Now I know why people sit on benches in the middle of town. What a lovely time I had!

Each day is new, each day is full of wonder and awe, and you never know what's going to happen. Plan a few things and don't be surprised if nothing comes out. Enjoy the "Art of the Wasted Day" (Pamela Hamplf). There are no judgement calls, if a movie is to be seen for the 30th time, so be it, if you choose to reread a book for the fifth time, great. As Thoreau said, to know a book is to reread it. Time is our ally, use it to stroll on new avenues of your mind. "Adventure is not outside man; it is within" (George Lewes).

One of the possible results of venage is the need to move—and I have been blessed with a new place in the rectory of my middle son, and embraced by a new community of friends. Truly a new adventure—and demanding a degree of adaptation and acceptance and humor.

What has made the move favorable is simple; I brought only the treasures of my past and placed them in the space provided. So many people are loathe to leave their

homes. They cling to cement and wood without realizing what has made the move successful, the very treasures that are movable!

One of the most jarring changes is the relationship with your children. Children take the reins and before you know it they are the parent and you are the child! I can only speak of my experience, but I am now very comfortable following conversations I can only half hear, making the necessary agreements and adjustments, but it took some getting used to. My new lifestyle sometimes takes a turn to the laughable. Just getting used to where things are stored took forever, because who knows why it is put there! Since my memory is not working that well, every day was a new day—and I sometimes wake up wondering for a second where I am. It's like waking up in a foreign country—an adventure each day

Keep your sense of humor about you, do not worship the old way and agree with whatever your children have to offer, then do as you please. When the roles are reversed (parent vs child) responsibilities are also transferred. What a relief. As I ponder the move and wonder why the difficulty...of course, it is usually I who have made it difficult. Look forward to the adventure. "What's more, we grossly underestimate the extent to which changing our behaviors, rather than our circumstances can significantly increase our well-being" (Adam Sternburgh, *New York* magazine). Maybe making changes when you're old keeps you young.

## **CHAPTER 4                      USE RAILLERY**

"Can an old dog learn new tricks?" Who knows until you try. It's so easy to complain, to talk about yourself, to compare what is to what was. But if you want happiness and joy, learn to laugh at yourself and listen to others.

But here's an interesting comparison. Compare how children feel about getting older with how you do. "Do you realize that the one time in our lives when we like to get old is when we're kids?" (George Carlin). Young children count their age in fractions (five and half years old). But after a couple of digits, we usually just count our age one year at a time. But let me tell you, when you reach ninety, you get excited all over again. You automatically accept compliments on your age, as if you have accomplished something fantastic all by yourself, simply because you are alive and able to talk. With a measurement of pride, you look forward to your next birthday. I'm almost ninety-one! So it goes. I heard someone say the other day, "I'm ninety-five and a half."

Now that's funny.

To adapt use raillery. There have been occasions when I have had a problem at the cash register after shopping and have held up the line. Instead of getting flustered, I apologize with raillery: "So sorry, lately I've become puny and pitiful." And before you know it, smiles appear and denials are heard! Nothing is easier than getting help when

you're a little old lady. I can't remember the last time I had to carry my groceries to the car.

Use your wit. Recently, I attended a cocktail party where I knew only the hostess and I was prepared to be a quiet observer. Then a person politely introduced himself and started a general conversation. One question was 'how did I spend my days?' For some unfathomable reason the flood gates of wit opened and I answered. "After a few hours of effort I'm able to get out of bed. Savoring my breakfast is my next ritual and then I ponder the news from the local paper. When that's done, I flirt with nudity." He stopped me right there and asked, "what do you mean?" Very seriously I replied, "I take a shower!" The response was laughter and from then on the party was fun. I became a participant rather than an observer. All I had to do was use raillery and a bit of imagination!

How do I really spend the day? To tell you the truth, I have objectives but rarely succeed in fulfilling them. Often I'm disgusted with myself as I succumb to my addiction to computer games (Solitaire!) instead of getting back to writing my memoirs. In this last chapter of my life, you would think I'd hustle to complete them. No, I have become a master at procrastination. I begin to berate myself.

But forgiveness and compassion are the blessings of wisdom—and that is supposed to be one of the great benefits of aging. So I take pity on myself and my many shortcomings. After dwelling for a few moments on disappointment with myself, I consider what to do to remedy my dilemma. I know! I will write about old age! I will use strange old words like *caducity* and make up new ones like *venage*. I will give myself another objective to procrastinate over.

My days are now spent completing one of my objectives, a book on the art of aging. Lately I have been at full speed; watch out and don't get in my way! If I feel like I'm going too fast, I take a break and remember it's all right to waste a day, day-dream, and take a moment to remember. Here I follow Roger Rosenblatt's advice: to remember well is to enjoy selective moments of the past, but don't remember too much!

Play with words. Avoid overusing common words that have run their course and are boring. Take "fun." Are you having fun? What a question! I like to use a word my son tells me comes from Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*: *transplendent*. I am having a transplendent time!

Use fresh expressions. Alexander Pope wrote, "true wit is nature to advantage dress'd. What oft was thought, not ne'er so well express'd." And even if the words are common, your manner of speaking may be playful and spark joy. "Remember that age cannot wither the enthusiasm that is evident in the discourse. And wit is the salt of conversation, not the food" (William Hazlett). Ah, the art of conversation and banter, one of my favorite fields of interest (I wrote a book on it: *Speak Easy: Mary Lou's Rules for Engaging Conversation*; available on Amazon).

## Chapter Five

## ADAPT WITH GRACE

Alas, you don't have a playmate. Someone to banter with, someone to share the witticisms. You miss your playmates of the past. The someone who understood your quips, your humor. They're dead or gone. Sad but true.

First of all, remember the rules and you're never alone. With you all the while are your memories and your imagination. Whether you live with someone in their home, live alone in your home, or live in assisted living, your own room is your sanctuary. Take pride in your cozy and comfortable place. Create the illusion of your palace, and as Thoreau said, 'illusion is the first of all pleasures.' Your treasures are evidence of your life and your life is worthy of note!

So the years slip by and you refuse to die, you no longer drive, you see the same people, you are tickling boredom. Now is the time to realize that having read a book, seen a movie once is only the beginning. To reread a book is the beginning of true appreciation, to see a movie again and again is realizing how subtle the innuendoes are. Give it a try!

Have you looked in the mirror and wondered who you are looking at? The dawning of the realization it is YOU. You feel different on the inside than you look on the outside. The outside is what the aging process does for others to see. All this time the inside has captured your memories, your experiences and your reactions. It is the essential you. The outside is simply a facade. Keep the facade clean, polished and dressed then forget it. The true you is hidden and it is up to you to show it by the way you act, talk, respond. Show the essential you. Live in the NOW.

While living in the NOW choose a time during the day, night that is just yours. During the chosen period you're using your imagination, drift into any avenue of thought.

My time is my cocktail hour and I often invite the unseen guests. I invite God and Jesus and whoever comes to mind. We discuss various topics and are known to disagree! This time is my treasure time, my golden hour. I deeply treasure my relationship with God.

Sometimes I do have the pleasure of people I can see. One of my friends came and began with this old chestnut: "Old age is hell!" Well, I wasn't going to let that pass unchallenged. The conversation took off, the optimist, the one who was living with the rules of venage, versus the pessimist who saw only the dark clouds. Our compromise was 'the last chapter, venage is difficult.'

Adapting to a different way of life is taxing but doable. But what are our choices? Someone asked me, "how does it feel to be ninety?" Without hesitation I answered, "amazed and awed." I have been blessed with a sound mind with a few kinks, an active imagination, and a sense of humor. Thank God. I've accepted my appearance and realized my limitations. With time as my ally, there is so much to see, so much to record

that I wish everyone will have as much enjoyment as I have being ancient. The pleasure of a moment, the time to watch the clouds float by. To have a leisurely thoughtful day and maybe accomplish a bit of something.

One of the questions that occurs to those of us in our venage: Why am I living this long? My answer: Because we have an obligation to be a role model to younger generations. Age with grace and humor. Getting old and dying are scary things for young people to observe; old people too! We see the effects of aging from the neck down and on the surface, but what happens to people mentally, emotionally, spiritually and psychologically? My elders never discussed such topics. There was no Dr. Spock on aging for us! Now there is a flood of books—and here I am adding my inch of ink.

Tell those who look to you for answers and advice and an example of how to live a long time... be bright enough, bold enough and brave enough to do differently what you have always done a certain way. Enlighten them to limitations, discomforts. Emphasize the sheer enjoyment of the moment, to live for the day not the future and remember the past. As Buddha says, “change is inevitable.”

Tell them it is okay to be old. Maybe even better than okay, if you can adapt with grace to a new day.

Every age involves change and every age has its beauty. Beauty is evidence of time, endurance and change. Venage is the period of time we finally observe, ponder the scenes that present themselves. “Many eyes go through the meadow, but few see the flowers in it.” (Emerson) And as Mary Oliver said, “Pay Attention!”

Be proud of getting to venage—it ain’t easy getting old— but don’t fall into the trap of bragging. Keep your cool, keep your humor, develop humility, surround yourself with joy. “We are most joyful when we focus on others and not ourselves... turn away from our self regard and regard the needs of others; this is the true secret of joy” (Desmond Tutu, Dalai Lama, *The Book of Joy*). As we release judgements and unwanted habits, we can increase our feelings of spirituality and peace.

As Maurice Chevalier sang in *Gigi*: “I’m glad I’m not young anymore, I’m so comfortable.” Feel free to show it, Smile, relax and realize there are virtues of wisdom and compassion that come with age (read Jimmy Carter’s book *The Virtues of Aging*).

Let go of *things*. Give to others or give away or simply dispose of objects you no longer use or clothes you haven’t worn in a decade. How about jewelry? Maybe you have a few favorites, but the rest of it, see how it looks on your daughter, daughter-in law, and granddaughter. You’ll be surprised at the results. I know, I’ve done it and the pleasure of giving rings true and love spills over.

**Conclusion      THE LAST CHAPTER**

How do you want this Last Chapter to end? Colette, the great French writer and bon vivant, made her last chapter enviable. “Although confined by arthritis, she exhibited gaiety and gusto.” (Introduction to *Cheri* and *The Last of Cheri*).

Don't be shy, radiate. Live your last chapter as a love story. Condemn envy and jealousy. They become mere shadows when you have learned to enjoy venage.

Paint—in whatever medium works for you. “Matisse, his hands crippled by arthritis, picks up scissors and painted paper and finds a new world of purity; de Kooning on the edge of Alzheimers paints some of his greatest pictures.” (Adam Gopnik, “Younger Longer” in *The New Yorker* May 20th, 2019).

You have accepted who you are and what you can now do. You have released yourself from convention. You can indulge in harmless and fun eccentricities, as long as it does not disturb, disrupt, hurt others (but feel free to mildly embarrass your children—your grandchildren will love it!).

Above all, venage is a time of liberation. “We can feel free from the tyranny of worrying about our appearance” (NYTimes by Mary Piper, June 12,2019), and our routines. You are flexible. Routines are no longer master but merely guides to oblige your purposes. You are loose, and open to invitations. You can always say no, but yes can be said too.

This time of life offers much despair, loss of loved ones, and physical limitations, but be strong like Colette and exhibit gaiety and gusto. Comedy abounds, despair is fugacious (fleeting), your rugose (wrinkled skin) is a badge of honor, and raillery (light humor) is tucked into every corner of your day.

Life is a gift, a present. I thank God for every day of it. And when I die—which cannot be too far in the future—I want to be able to say what the poet Mary Oliver said in her poem, “When Death Comes”:

When it's over, I want to say all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom, taking the world in my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder  
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,  
or full of argument.  
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

Bon Voyage! Bon Venage! Love, Mary Lou