

ON BEING ONE HUNDRED

By Martha Tolles

It's a little odd to be a survivor. I'm not quite sure why I deserve it. People often ask me how did I achieve such status and I don't know why it happened. I had a wonderful mother who lived to be eighty five and I had a grandma who made it to ninety-seven so perhaps the genes were helping me and maybe having such a happy childhood did too.

Grandma listened to a doctor on the radio back in the 1920s and 30s and he preached a good diet which she followed and had all of us adhere to. Since she lived with our family and kept a vegetable garden in the backyard, we grew up on lots of fruits and vegetables and she also insisted we eat only whole grain bread. Since white bread was banned at home, it was considered quite a treat. This would explain what happened when my brother John visited our neighbors. They always asked him, "John, do you want a piece of cake or a piece of white bread?" He invariably said, "Oh, white bread please."

Or maybe my health remained good because I ate a banana most days and went for daily walks, did exercises and rode a stationary bicycle which my husband gave to me one Mother's Day. It's funny how I've begun to feel boastful about my age after years of desperately trying to hide it. Suddenly all my secretive friends are announcing their ninety some birthdays too. Although there was my uncle's wife who claimed to be ninety-five but after she died we found out she was ninety-eight.

Or perhaps I lived so long because my husband and I raised five boys and one girl. He used to tell people "We have five sons, and each one has a sister," though some kids guessed we had ten or twelve! One time I had to lie in bed for about a month with a back problem. I got so bored I decided to write a children's story. I found out I loved making things up. So naturally my first book was called Too Many Boys. After that I wrote more books, short stories and essays.

One elderly gentleman said he thought he lived well into his nineties because “I didn’t go to excess in anything. I stuck to moderation.” When you apply that behavior to many things in life, it could be quite helpful. In addition, my granddaughter said, “Your optimistic attitude and not taking things personally meant that you had less stress and that can mean better health.” So maybe attitude and “enjoying the day”, as a friend said, helped me.

Although many in my generation took up smoking, fortunately a lot of us gave it up, though it was very addicting. While struggling with the habit, I decided to quit by smoking lettuce cigarettes, which tasted awful by the way. Someone rushed up to me at a party at my house and said, “Martha! I smell something terrible. I think your couch is on fire.” After that, I renounced the foul butt.

So I’ve lived on and lost dear family members, including my wonderful husband but we had a fabulous life together. I do have eleven magnificent grandchildren and seven great grands. And I am glad I’m here. It is rather satisfying to think of myself as being as old as a century.