



True Confessions: Do I practice what I preach?

by

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I turned 86 this summer – no, that's **NOT** the confession I'm making. In fact, I'm very grateful that I've made it this far, when so many of my dearest friends haven't. But I have recently been reflecting more than usual on Life and my own life, and I'm struck by how much I'm still learning about both, even at this advanced age.

For instance, one of the things many people my age say is that they're glad they no longer care what others think of them. But, on self-examination, I have to admit I still want to be paid attention to and admired.

So, it's embarrassing to confess (here it comes) that I have not been doing a good job with what I profess publicly in the Ageless Mind Project -- that is, "walking the talk." You know what I mean: consistently putting the theories and research we offer our readers into actual practice.

I think of all the excellent suggestions we've made in print about connecting more deeply with nature, paying attention to self-care (healthy diet, sufficient sleep, exercise), spending quality time with other people, volunteering, taking on new cognitive challenges, having a sense of purpose, journaling for self-growth.

What's the reality? Well...here's one example: when we recommended journaling as a path to developing an ageless mind, I was very enthusiastic, because reflection comes naturally to me. But I failed so miserably at actually using a journal daily, weekly, or even monthly that I finally had to acknowledge total defeat.

I really did try to embrace the activity, especially since one of my friends journals the first thing every morning, rain or shine. If she doesn't do it, she's cranky all day. But, for me, it became like clearing out the attic -- something I know it would be good to do...maybe when we decide to sell the house? (I'm thinking now of hiring a young person to do it for me.)

I have the same problem with exercising regularly. Every day, reports come out reaffirming the connection between exercise and healthy longevity. When I told Josh, my husband and co-founder of our nonprofit, about the new research on the value of doing isometric exercises like wall squats and planks, he immediately added them to his routine. I haven't.

That's the key word: *routine*. Josh thrives on routine. It is apparently not in my DNA. I suppose I could pathologize this and label it Attention Deficit Disorder. Instead I have decided to look at it through a different lens, one that can help me design *my own* best version of an ageless mind. That lens is called Character Strengths.

What gave me this idea is an essay, "The Hedgehog and the Fox" by the philosopher Isaiah Berlin, that has always stuck in my mind. He borrowed these names from an ancient Greek poet who wrote: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing."

Berlin wonders if these are two different ways of experiencing the world. Foxes "pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory...their thought is scattered or diffused, moving on many levels," while hedgehogs "relate everything to a single central vision...a single, universal, organizing principle." Notice that one isn't better than the other: Berlin thinks of Shakespeare as a Fox while Aristotle is a Hedgehog. Neither is bad company to be in! And, as he acknowledges, nobody is completely one or the other.

So I've been considering the pros as well as cons of being a Fox. Now, rather than continuing to beat my breast over what I am *not* doing, I'm having a different kind of inner dialogue, asking myself, "Self, what are the things that energize you, feel natural to who you are, and make you feel truly alive?" Because an ageless mind is, above all, a lively one.

From this perspective I see that although journaling didn't work for me, just being willing to try it started me on a search for what could work better to reach the same larger goal – **which is to be able to reflect on what we experience**. This is one of the most powerful tools we can use to design our ageless minds.

The same is true for an exercise routine. I'm thinking about it differently now. How can I use some of my greatest character strengths to find an exercise habit that will stick? Here's where my character strength of Perseverance could come in handy. Routines are not my natural habitat, but I can take heart in the fact that I have stuck to meaningful goals...which I never truly realized until now.

I have wondered: should I try to become more of a Hedgehog like Josh? I was willing to try that approach because it makes building habits easy for him, but — like journaling — it just didn't work for me. So, although we are looking for the same outcome – that evergreen mind – we need to do it in very different ways.

What else helps?

Other people. Many have improved my life in very specific ways. One example: six years ago I tried Intermittent Fasting for a variety of health reasons. I was wise enough to join a group to learn more about it so I could figure out how it might work best for me. (I understand all this only now, by the way.) It turned out to be a great fit for both Josh and me. The support of others was crucial to my -- and our -- success.

As I continue to reflect, I realize how much other people's minds enrich mine. The comments and posts that folks have contributed to our project, both online and in person, have been inspiring, sparking new awarenesses and expanding my horizons. I feel that what we're doing together is crossing a new frontier in aging.

The common denominator for me in all this is the character strength of creativity — being open to new ideas and challenges, trying them out, and tweaking them to fit who I am. This has led to becoming a better cook (don't laugh!) and even to building a thriving virtual community in the Metaverse.

I'm not much of an artist or musician or poet, but I have found that expressing what my imagination comes up with has produced unexpected benefits. Right now, I'm exploring AI (I consider AI to stand for Assistive Intelligence). I've found it can help me view my thoughts from new angles. P.S. I did *not* use AI for anything I've written here. Why would I want to do that?

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