Editor’s Letter-Fall 2014

September 8, 2014 By Kate Ferguson

So Do You Want to Live Forever?

Recently, 60 Minutes broadcast an episode on a study that followed men and women older than 90, a group that’s called “the oldest old.” The goal of the research was to determine what variables led to a long life, what shape these folks are in, and how we can boost our chances of sticking around long enough to join these nonagenarians.

The broadcast opened with a sweeping statement: “It’s always been a dream of mankind to live forever.” The announcement brought to mind a movie titled The Picture of Dorian Gray, adapted from the book by Oscar Wilde. In it, a young man named Dorian Gray is the subject of a painting that shows him in the flower of his full youth and beauty.

When Gray realizes that his handsome face and body will one day succumb to the ravages of time and death, he exclaims that he’d sell his soul to have only the painting age while he remains young and immortal. In the book and movie, Gray got his wish. As time passed, the painting aged and became ugly because of the evil acts he committed. But Gray remained young and good-looking in spite of it all.

Interestingly, although the study’s findings didn’t explore the moral outlook of its “oldest old” participants, it did look at their brain health, cognitive abilities and experiences with the onset of dementia.

Among the more interesting findings was that longevity didn’t seem to have a connection with downing a bunch of vitamins or being slimmer rather than carrying some extra weight. What’s more—and this part was not surprising—people who exercised, as compared with those who didn’t, lived longer. In addition, those who smoked died earlier than nonsmokers.

In the book, Dorian Gray smoked opium to forget his evil-doing. But as he lived on, his portrait continued to age. The paint peeled, and his face became distorted and disfigured. Gray’s brain and body remained sound, his cognitive abilities stayed sharp and his senses keen.

According to the study’s principal researcher, one of things she noticed was that to age well in body and mind it’s key to eat healthy and stay physically and mentally active. In an interview, this

scientist said much of the data that researchers were looking at involved studying “the kinds of things our mother told us.” (You know, things like: Eat your fruits and veggies; don’t overdo stuff; and moderation is the key.)

Is that the secret then? Listen to mom so you can live a better, longer life? I think that sometimes the answers to so many questions—especially those related to a richer, healthier, more long-lived existence—are just that simple.

But since I have no proof of this, I’ll continue to watch for more findings from this study. Scientists launched the research in 2003 at the University of California, Irvine, and the National Institute on Aging renewed the funding last fall to continue the study.

And if your mom is 90 or older, also let her know what you find out, so she can smile and maybe say, “I told you so, didn’t I?”

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