

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

I feel sad as I watch my parents grow old. They're still in good health and in their early seventies, but I see how they are aging. My kids have all left home (one for college, and one is now married and pregnant). Is it normal to feel such nostalgia for the "old days" when my kids were small and my parents seemed like they had a lot of life left for them?

-- Marjorie

Dear Marjorie,

Change is always present. In the Buddhist philosophy, our insistence on things staying the same is an illusion and the "rickety foundation" upon which many of us base our understanding of life. Whether we like it or not, everything is always in a constant state of flux and change. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus once wrote, "You cannot step into the same river twice, for the waters are ever flowing on to you."

The truth is as Heraclitus said, we can't step into the same river twice, as much as we would like to. Like you, I was reminded of how everything changes when my family came to visit me at the beach. As we hauled beach chairs, umbrellas, coolers, fishing poles, and plastic toys over the dunes I remembered myself at age six or seven, in a little skirted bathing suit, ready with my plastic pail and shovel. I thought about my father taking me out to jump the waves, my mother sitting under an umbrella laughing and talking with her sisters, my younger cousins making castles in the sand. But that was many years ago. My mother and one of her sisters have passed on, my cousins have children of their own, and my father – now in his mid-seventies, walks with a cane and isn't jumping any waves — with or without me. Sometimes change seems like it can break your heart. But when I looked around during this visit, I still saw my family together. My father watched and laughed as my brother jumped the waves with *his kids*, and my cousin's *children* built castles in the sand.

Marjorie, it sounds to me as though your sorrow may be influenced somewhat by a bit of "empty nest" syndrome. This phrase describes the feelings of sadness and loss that many parents (especially mothers), experience when their children no longer live with them or need day-to-day care. Don't be ashamed of these feelings, they're perfectly natural. It is a similar sense of sorrow to what some people feel on retiring from a job that they have been vitally involved in for many years. Not only is there a dramatic adjustment to a new situation, but there are also feelings of loss associated with such life passages.

It's easy to focus on the grief and loss of this time in your life. But it is also a time of new beginnings and self-renewal. Your children have grown up, and your parents will continue to get older (hopefully for a long, long time) but, at the same time, you are embarking on a new chapter in your life. Don't fear change; embrace it. Remember what Benjamin Franklin said, "When you're finished changing, you're finished."

Just imagine how many new and wonderful adventures are in store for you. It may help to remember that your life, like all of ours, is a series of moments that will never be repeated. How lucky we are when we cherish every one of those moments. How

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enlightened we would be if we could be really present – really live every minute of our lives with gusto -- all the while remembering that we cannot step into the same river twice.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2004 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.