



Special Report

Aging Like the Rich and Famous

The whole world is watching Oprah age. We keep a sharp eye on Madonna, Cher and Dillon, too. How our celebrities age is no small matter. We all want to age like the stars. And when we see them aging well, we somehow feel better about ourselves. Wrinkles are the great leveler, and if they can gracefully leave youth behind why not us?

Through the years, I have had the unique opportunity to talk to many celebrities about their personal thoughts on successful aging. Whether at a dinner party, as a guest on their show, or they as a guest on mine, I always snuck in a question on aging, even in our younger days.

When I cobble together the patchwork of their responses, and observe how they are actually age, I'm impressed by how true they are to their vision. For example, I've appeared on OPRAH three or four times (a senior moment when you can't remember how many times you've sat in her Green Room.) Before or after every show, guests get a chance to say hello, take a picture, and shake hands with her. Oprah always mentioned closeness of friends as a high priority in later life. So it's no surprise that her extravaganza of a 50th birthday dubbed "Legends," was a

Hollywood style salute to her friends honoring them, not herself.

Regis Philbin, by contrast, spoke to me of family, marriage and his spouse. Even on the air, when we spoke about attitudes towards money, he joked about this wife. True to form, his wife took over the co-host spot, as he worked to replace Kathy with Kelly. Regis was 67 when he became host of “Who Wants To Be a Millionaire?” But once he did, millions saw that a perky spirit transforms aging into “neotony”, a zoological term referring to eternal youthfulness.

And so these two icons of American television fall directly in line with what experts like identify as the essentials of successful aging—friends and family.

And then came Sally Jessie Raphael. Like me, Sally was a long time radio personality, and no youngster when TV embraced her. My one and only appearance on her show was a shouting match regarding aggressive girls who unabashedly peruse boys. Since I’m used to more subdued programming (although I did, once, make a fool of myself on the Maury Povitch show), I was out of my element. But, boy was Sally having a great time. She epitomized the third leg of the successful aging stool, recognition and relevance. The glint in Sally’s eye told us that she was thrilled to be an overnight success, after all those years.

The lesson I found most compelling for my life came from the great singing group the Turtles. They were guests on my radio show, appearing to promote a charity event for autism research. My fourteen-year-old daughter was gaga with excitement. How, I wondered, did she know everything, and I mean everything about these musical icons? “We constantly reinvent ourselves,” they told my audience. It’s this flexibility that makes us all able to surprise ourselves, as we grow older. It’s not so much that we get better with age at the things we always did (although a celebrity voice coach told me that Tony Bennett’s and Mel Torme’s voices actually did improve with age), it’s that we do new things we never thought we could do or had never done before.

Things like having great sex and being sexy. Which brings me to sexpert Dr. Ruth Westheimer. As New Yorkers and radio hosts, Dr. Ruth and I ran into each other a lot, usually at charity events. During an extravaganza at Tavern on the Green, the diminutive doctor told me that sex after 60 was a slam-dunk, after 90 “also good.” The important thing for successful aging was continued intimacy, she said, in any which way meaningful to you. No rules.

But it's also fair to ask how celebrities view the physical changes that mark the passage of time. I've met both Cheryl Tiegs and Twiggy, and yes they both are absolutely gorgeous, at any age. I was at the press launch for Dove soap and its new campaign to extol all ages and body types. Susan Sarandon and are constant examples of lasting beauty (throw in Shaun Connery for very good measure.). But for me, the ideal is Rue Mc Callahan, who became most beautiful as the quintessential Golden Girl

At a dinner with Rue at Sardis, set up by maturing wunderkind, TV producer Richard Hall (the Dick Cavett Show, the Jerry Lewis Telethon), all eyes were on Rue, even those of other celebrities. She is just a force of nature." I'm not Blanche,"she told us. "I am actually rather shy. But people think of me that way, and they want to." They certainly do, because we relate to the boisterous, full of life tootsie she plays. Many of us do indeed look better at 65 than we did at 35, not just for our age, but because we are actually more fit and self possessed. We fit better into older skin.

The older many celebrities get the more serious they get about legacy, philanthropy, and companionship. Bill Gates leaves business to become a full time philanthropist, Paul McCartney turns 64 and gets an answer to his question, "Yes, we still love you. He also gets divorced, as we age there's little time to tolerate wrong moves.

In my personal and professional quest for successful aging for all, it is Jaclyn Kennedy Oasis, at a time when she was Jackie O, who influenced me the most. I am completely taken by her unflinching determination to be treated for her cancer at home, to live and die on her own terms. It was because of Jacky that many of today's assisted technologies, hospice outreach, and health care directives gained momentum. Jackie went beyond successful aging to successful dying. But the premise of both is the same, surround yourself with friends and family, stay in touch with your world, always keep relevant. Make every moment count. This does not take either fame or fortune. But, if you want some of that, too, remember Grandma Moses. You're never too old to be who you could have been.

