

from **Speakers' Spotlight Blog** • March 2011

Older and Wiser

by *Brian Thwaites*

I've been thinking a lot lately about the passage of time.

In a few short months, I'll be celebrating a rather significant birthday. And, while I'm certainly not ready to be put out to pasture quite yet, let's just say I'll soon be entitled to some pretty sweet seniors' discounts.

So I'm reminded of what Andy Rooney, of *60 Minutes* fame, once said: "I didn't get old on purpose; it just happened. If you're lucky, it could happen to you too." And I couldn't agree more; I sure *do* feel fortunate.

And I'm also much more judicious about what I do with my time these days. More than ever before, as I continue to learn about and be engaged in new and interesting experiences, I don't want to fritter my time away. I want to spend it *well*.

That's one of the reasons I'm so intrigued by the recent discovery that our brains are "plastic" — malleable and entirely capable of change as we age. And neuroscientists are working hard to discover exciting new ways we can keep our brains engaged. Old dogs! New tricks!

And here's even more good news: As it turns out, changing/growing/stretching our brains doesn't really have to be all that complicated. We don't have to spend money or even set aside extra time each day to work at it. In fact, the process can be as simple as being mindful of simple principles that can be incorporated into our daily lives, such as the following:

- Be physically active. Your brain needs plenty of oxygen.
- Develop a skill and/or talent --- and get really good at it.
- Commit to lifelong learning.
- Deal with stress by establishing good coping skills.
- Challenge your brain --- and have fun doing it.
- Enjoy the company of others, including some who think differently than you do.
- Laugh. A lot.

My own family history suggests to me that these are *exactly* the kinds of things we should be doing. Both my father and my father-in-law lived to 86 years old and were classic proponents of just such principles.

They were smart, active and social guys who never stopped challenging their brains. They were blessed with 60+-year marriages, enjoyed lengthy (and busy!) retirements and cheerfully volunteered their time and expertise to help others. Measured by pretty well any standard, they lived happy, interesting and fulfilling lives.

Sadly, they're no longer with us. One morning last April, just minutes apart, the two of them were delivered by separate ambulances to the same hospital and were placed side-by-side in neighbouring beds in the Emergency Room. They died within a few weeks of each other, and I miss them.

And so, as I look forward to my upcoming birthday, I find myself reflecting on the lives of these

two gentlemen who were such an inspiration to me. And I'm reminded of something that comedian George Burns, who continued to work until shortly before his death at age 100, once said: "You can't help getting older, but you don't have to get old."

And surely one of the very best ways to not "get old" is to keep our brains engaged and treasure the time we're given to enjoy life.

After all, it ain't gonna last forever.