

**Tips from a Renaissance Woman:  
How to live your best life now and into your 90's**

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I've never called myself a renaissance woman, but others have, given my quite varied career path, a path that fails to follow any of the examples that career path theorists have identified. The closest I can come is to describe that path as a spiral, in which I've been able to pull up skills I've obtained in one occupation for use in a new occupation, transforming them to fit the situation. These tips come from what I've managed to learn along that meandering route—one that has been immensely satisfying and rewarding—and a path I continue to travel.

**Tip # 1: Recycle your skills to apply to something new**

Everyone has some special skill or talent that can be pulled through to be used in what looks like a totally new career.

I had this insight when someone commented that my law degree was probably useful in my position as Sherman's

First Selectman. I realized that the primary skill I brought to that position—a skill that pervaded every position I've held before or since—was communication.

It was nursing that taught me the true art of communication: listening to another person without feeling the need to formulate a response while they were talking. Most people simply want to be heard, and there were many, many times when I listened to someone complain—usually about something I was unable to change (the woman concerned that the neighbor's cat was scaring away the birds) or refer to the right person (along with a suggestion as to how best to frame their request). I found that many people who left with no answer, were still satisfied that someone had finally listened to them without judging or commenting on the reasonableness or validity of their complaint.

Skill in communicating was, of course, vital to success as a nurse, listening to patients and families and teaching them how to manage their illness at home. And it was vital as a nurse educator, teaching complex concepts to beginning students and advising doctoral students concerning how

their study question fit into one or another conceptual framework.

As an attorney, I provide “plain language” explanations of all the documents I prepare when doing estate planning with people. There’s no good reason for them to have to wade through legalese to figure out what’s being said.

A lifelong love of writing was another mode of communication that I brought into every position I held, from writing articles and books in a publish-or-perish university environment, to writing curriculum models for the nursing programs I headed at Western, to writing position descriptions for a nursing management career ladder that I created when consulting at the National Institutes of Health in Washington, to writing grants in my role as First Selectman.

My latest use of this particular communication skill is in writing mysteries based on my practice as an attorney specializing in estate planning, probate, and elder law. The transformation from writing non-fiction, factually based stuff, to writing fiction was initially uncomfortable for me. But my

late husband guided me in “pushing the envelope” as we developed the characters and plot for the first of these books. I’ve now finished two, both set in the fictional Connecticut town of Woodson Falls and featuring attorney Gaby Quinn. I’m hard at work on the third, and already thinking about possible plots for the fourth.

It’s fun for now. When the fun becomes a chore, I’ll likely move on to something else, but I’m certain that my skill in communication will continue to fuel whatever direction I might take in the future.

So this first tip is to take the time to identify that special skill that you have, recognizing that it can be recycled as you move on through life, fueling your next endeavor—as well as the one after that.

### **Tip #2: Be like George**

It’s important to remain open to new stuff. Curiosity can open doors to possibilities you hadn’t imagined.

One of my favorite books when I was growing up was Curious George--actually, the entire series of curious George stories.

George is a monkey whose curiosity takes him on many adventures—often becoming misadventures—and always ending with George being rescued by the man in the yellow hat who found him in the jungle and brought him home to live in a zoo.

Curiosity can lead to trouble (just consider the dead cat) but it also can open your eyes to whole other worlds.

I've had a life-long interest in prehistoric man as well as in astronomy. I once went on a weeklong travel adventure offered by an archaeological institute in New Mexico. The focus of this particular trip captured my attention because it involved the various ways in which ancient cultures of the southwest used astronomy to guide their lives.

Along the way we encountered examples of the rock art that peppered the archaeology sites we visited. Many of the images in that art were of man-like figures with square heads

and elaborate headdresses. The tour leader offered various theories about what these figures represented. One of the tour participants was a physician, nicknamed “Bear,” who was a Hopi. As we puzzled over the rock art figures he said, “They’re space men.” Just think where such an idea might take you.

My second tip is this: Remaining open to new things keeps you young and vibrant. So, stay curious, keep learning, shift your perspectives on the world, and re-evaluate and even tolerate alternative opinions.

### **Tip #3: Act your age**

We’ve all heard the truism, that “age is just a number.” It really is.

Don’t be restricted by what’s considered “proper” for someone your age. That type of thinking shuts off all kinds of possibilities.

I was married to a man who was 21 years my senior, a marriage that lasted 43 totally blissful years. In fact, even

years into our marriage, friends and acquaintances thought we were newlyweds.

Our marriage succeeded, in large part, because John was truly young at heart—almost a kid at times—and encouraged me to do the same. He was spontaneous, playful, and often plain silly. Although both were late careers for him, John's work as a nurse and then as a paraprofessional at Sherman's grammar school revealed his special gift with children, a gift that I believe was born of his deep connection with his own youthfulness. He retired at 92, just two years before dying of complications related to his Parkinson's disease, leaving work he loved because he didn't want the children to worry if he fell.

After two-and-a-half years of loneliness as a widow, I am now seeing a man who is 21 years my junior—a man who reminded me when we first met that “age is just a number.” I realized that was true because I feel like I'm 42 inside this 76-year-old body.

I learned another age-related lesson along the way that has kept me feeling youthful. I learned to make friends with my child-self.

We all suffer from real or imagined hurts from our childhood. We tend to shutter away that wounded child. But unless we welcome that aspect of ourselves, we can't be truly and fully alive in spirit.

I recognized this need to honor my child-self when I was shopping one day at a local gift store and spotted a stuffed rabbit perched on a shelf, calling to the little girl who was part of me to take it home. I walked out without buying it, but the rabbit kept haunting me. I went back the next day and bought the rabbit.

I have never again denied my child-self—my little girl—something that she would regret not having. I'm not sure if my longing for an Audi A5 convertible or a green Miata with a tan leather interior qualifies, but I do know that I left a teddy bear on the shelf in the Las Vegas Bellagio gift shop (John thought we had enough teddy bears already) that still calls to me. I'll bring him home the next time I'm there.

This message of befriending your child-self is poignantly depicted in Sally Field's incredible enactment of the starring role in the film, *Sybil*, and, more recently in Taron Egerton's portrayal of Elton John in the film, *Rocketman*.

So my third tip is to listen when someone says, "Act your age," and be the age that you are on the inside rather than the age you are on the calendar.

#### **Tip #4: Wear purple and pick daisies**

This tip is closely related to acting your age: Don't put off until tomorrow—or relegate to yesterday—what can be done or had today.

There's a lovely book of poems and short stories titled, *When I Am an Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple*. There's a companion volume titled, *If I Had My Life to Live Over, I Would Pick More Daisies*.

When we were growing up our parents often admonished us with “You’re too young to \_\_\_\_\_.” Fill in the blank with the messages you heard when you were a child: too young to date, too young to wear makeup, whatever.

Then we hear, “You’re too old to \_\_\_\_\_.” Fill in that blank with the messages you hear now: too old to wear that dress, too old to date, whatever. Often these later messages are self-generated. Ignore them.

This tip is simple: Do what moves you. Defy convention if it gives you joy. Live in the world today rather than in memories or regrets. Doing so keeps you young, engaged, and alive.

### **Tip #5: Raise your hand**

Volunteer. Give—not only money, but your time, your talent, and your presence. Do things that bring you into circles you may not have traveled before.

My late husband was an inveterate volunteer, mostly for local organizations and always an activity or cause that

involved doing something. We had a friend who, through the garden club, donated hundreds of Kousa dogwood saplings in an effort to make Sherman the Kousa capital of the world. John volunteered to water the saplings that had been planted on town properties throughout the summer. It was a tiresome chore (we had little rain that summer), but it brought him into contact with all manner of people.

I took a cue from him and volunteered—often with him—at library book sales, at historical society barn sales, at land trust picnics. I found myself more comfortable doing than simply standing around trying to look like I fit in.

It paid off at election time, when I was seen as a doer and people assumed I would work just as hard for the town—which I did. Of course, it didn't hurt that one of my close friends taught me how to schmooze—a singular social art if there ever was one.

This tip is to participate in activities, like this club, that keep you engaged with people. It's another way to live life more fully.

## **Tip #6: Keep moving**

As we age, we encounter all sorts of obstacles, not the least of which is assaults on our physical selves. The only way to move forward—regardless of the obstacle—is to move.

In addition to being labeled a renaissance woman, I've been called "bionic." My entire spine has been fused—in stages—except for the few vertebrae attached to my ribs. The x-rays look like scaffolding has been mounted along the 15 unattached vertebrae.

I also have an artificial ankle, the aftermath of having my heels fused some 30 years ago—all attributable to early onset osteoarthritis. I once was told I had an 80-year-old neck when I was just shy of my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. As of today, I've had 18 surgeries—mostly orthopedic—and still have my tonsils and appendix.

When I was recovering from the "big" spine surgery, involving fusion of 7 vertebrae anchored by fairly large nails in both hips, sitting up for a mere 10 minutes was

exhausting. The physical therapist who worked with me at home cautioned that, if I didn't start moving, I never would. I took endless trips with my walker from one end of the house to the other until I finally could move in the world again.

I never forgot that lesson and worked to mobilize as quickly as I could following subsequent surgeries.

It takes work—often hard work—to overcome the obstacles you encounter in life, whether physical, emotional, or financial. Do the work in order to move forward.

Deal with life's inevitable frustrations pragmatically. I've adopted one of my husband's favorite sayings as my own: It is what it is.

Rise above disability. Say, "I'll try" rather than "I can't." Up until the day before he died, John was determined to be the first person to conquer Parkinson's. There will come a time, of course, as it did with him, when you won't be able to overcome a deficit. Don't rush that moment prematurely.

This tip is simple: Move. Moving begets movement.

## **Tip #7: Kiss a frog**

Take chances; it's the only way to move away from your comfortable (and likely boring) way of being in the world.

I treat myself to a massage and a facial every now and then. Before I left the spa the last time I was there, I asked the person managing the place—an old friend—if I could take a few minutes to fix my hair since I was meeting someone for a drink.

Knowing that I had lost my husband, she asked about my date. I shared that I had joined a dating site and was meeting this person for the first time. She thought I was “brave,” confessing that she'd created a profile for a dating site several times, but never had the guts to post it. She asked how it was working for me and I said, “Interesting.”

It certainly is different from the ways I used to meet guys. Of the five men I actually met in person for coffee, a drink, or a meal, only one panned out. The rest were in the “frog” category, but the one has “prince” potential.

This tip isn't confined to dating after a loss. The tip is to dream big and take chances. You'll never know if something wonderful is just behind the door if you never take a chance and open it.

### **Tip #8: Forgive**

There is great peace and freedom to be had in forgiving both others and yourself. Holding grudges eats away at our lives and holds us back.

My husband and I had dear, dear friends in Sherman. We did everything together: big family feasts, travel adventures, whatever. Then Dave suddenly lost his job and, having borrowed and spent a heap of money renovating and expanding an historic house, he and his wife needed a loan to tide them over until Dave could get his own business up and running. The loan was eventually repaid and so, when our friends found themselves underwater again, we were happy to lend them more money.

I've always felt that when you lend money to a friend you need to consider the loan as a potential gift. So when our friends lost their house to foreclosure and moved away, I was sad to see them go and wished our loan-gift had been enough to enable them to stay.

We visited them once they were settled in a rental near the shore. On the drive home, John was seething. "How could he buy a boat of all things before paying us back?" He never let go of the anger and, of course, it hurt him more than it did our friend, who never knew.

It's important, too, to forgive yourself. We all have lapses—big and small—things we regret and wish we could un-do. To his dying day, my Dad regretted failing to recognize a potential royal flush on a video poker game, hitting the "deal" button too early and losing the hand. The most he could have lost on that hand was \$1.25 (he was frugal and never wagered more than that on a video poker game), but he held onto the regret.

Don't cry over spilled milk. Wipe it up and move on, evoking, once again, the "it is, what it is" mantra.

A teaching colleague once used an interesting metaphor to teach students about the concept of stress. She described our individual store of energy as a giant bubble—different sizes for different people—and stressors as individual bubbles within the larger energy bubble. The more stress bubbles we have and the larger they are, the less energy we have left to deal with the everyday. Forgiveness releases some of the stress bubbles that sap our energy store, enhancing the amount of free energy available to live life.

So here's the tip: Close your stress bubbles through forgiveness and boost your energy in the process.

### **Tip #9: Smell the roses**

We once planted a meadow in our backyard—John's way of avoiding the need to mow the lawn. Over time the variety of wildflowers in the meadow dwindled. At the same time, the daisies proliferated. John loved watching the daisies dance in the breeze.

We live on a large pond—more like a lake. The woman who sold us our house told us that the pond was always changing. She was right. I love watching the wind skitter across the water making small waves that lap against the shore.

And I need a trip to the ocean now and then. It restores my soul.

Trees also have this restorative capacity. Watching the leaves fluttering in the breeze connects me somehow with my husband and brings me peace.

Nature is a great restorative. So is sleep. And so is laughter.

This tip? Enjoy life's little pleasures.

### **Tip #10: Cultivate an attitude of gratitude**

A close acquaintance recently lost his wife quite suddenly. When I called to express my sorrow at her passing and to ask how he was doing he said, “It seems odd, but this year of isolation was one in which we were more truly together

than was possible prior to the pandemic.” He was grateful for the many years he and his wife had shared. He felt blessed to have had her in his life.

I was able to communicate to him my own sense of gratitude for the years of marriage that John and I had enjoyed together. I mourned, yes, because I miss him. But I am so filled with gratitude for all that we were to one another that it buffers the grief. My friend was relieved that someone felt the same way he did—not totally bowled over by the loss, but instead grateful for what had been.

I volunteered at our local vaccination clinic and was paired one afternoon with a nurse who had used the pandemic to complete an advanced degree she felt she couldn’t have accomplished if she hadn’t lost her job to the pandemic.

I’ve heard other stories of gratitude for the “pause” the pandemic provided to some of us. For these, it was a pause that refreshed. I certainly know that wasn’t true for the vast majority of people, but I was struck by the attitude of gratitude expressed by so many.

We tend to focus too often on what we don't have—enough time, enough money, enough energy—rather than all that we do have, including our own special and often unique gifts.

So this tip suggests that you acknowledge and honor all that you have.

**Final tip: Remain connected with your Supreme Being/Creator**

This final tip involves locating and honoring the transcendental.

However you may conceive God, remaining connected with that spiritual “other” places life in perspective and offers freedom to be who you are in all your dimensions and messiness.

Having a spiritual center somehow frees us to be all we are intended to be. Knowing that we are here on this earth for some purpose and for some length of days brings us down to size, allowing us to live life more fully.

I've reviewed a good deal of stuff related to successful aging and well-being over the years. I'm aware that I haven't offered much that is new. I've re-cast the truisms expressed by others in a different language—recycled them, so to speak—in the hope that some of these tips may resonate with you and guide you in living your best life now and into your 90's, and even beyond.