

RULES FOR AGING

Roger Rosenblatt

Roger Rosenblatt (b. 1940) is one of Time's most venerated editorial writers. His astute insights into politics and society, as well as his wonderful sense of humor, have delighted his readers for close to two decades. Rosenblatt graduated from Harvard, where he earned a Ph.D. and briefly taught English. He has been featured on television reading his eloquent Time essays.



- 1 Since older people are as close to perfection as human beings get, I thought it would be generous, from time to time, to use this space to offer guidelines for living to those less old to help them age successfully, or at all. The art of aging requires not doing things more than taking positive action, so this is essentially a list of "nots" and "don'ts."
- 2 1. *It doesn't matter.* Whatever you think matters, doesn't. This guideline is absolutely reliable and adhering to it will add decades to your life. It does not matter if you are late for anything; if you're having a bad hair day, or a no hair day; if your car won't start; if your boss looks at you cockeyed; if your girlfriend or boyfriend looks at you cockeyed; if you are cockeyed; if you don't get the promotion; if you do; if you have spinach in your teeth or if you lose your teeth in your spinach. It doesn't matter.
- 3 2. *Nobody is thinking about you.* Yes, I know. You are certain that your friends are becoming your enemies; that your enemies are acquiring nuclear weapons; that your grocer, garbage man, clergyman, sister-in-law, and dog are all of the opinion that you have put on weight; furthermore, that everyone spends two thirds of every day commenting on your disintegration, denigrating your work, plotting your murder. I promise you: Nobody is thinking about you. They are thinking about themselves, just like you.

- 4 3. *Do not go to your left.* Going to one's left, or working on going to one's left, is a basketball term for strengthening one's weakness. A right-handed player will improve his game considerably if he learns to dribble and shoot with his left hand, and to move to his left on the court. But this is true only for basketball, not for living. In life, if you attempt to strengthen a weakness, you will grow weaker. If, on the other hand (the right), you keep playing to your strength, people will not notice that you have weaknesses. Of course, you do not believe me. You will go ahead and take singing lessons or write that novel anyway. Trust me.
- 5 4. *Give honest, frank, and open criticism to nobody, never.* The following situation will present itself to you over and over: There is a friend, a relative, an employee, an employer, a colleague, whose behavior flaws are so evident to everyone but themselves, you just know that a straightforward, no-punches-pulled conversation with them will show them the error of their ways. They will see the light at once, and forever be grateful that only as good and candid a person as yourself would have sufficient kindness and courage to confront them.
- 6 Better still: From the moment you inform them about their bad table manners, their poor choices in clothing, their hygiene, their loudness, their deafness, their paranoia, they will reform on the spot. Their lives will be redeemed, and they will owe their renewed selves and all future happiness to you—honest, frank, and open you.
- 7 I implore you: forget about it. When the muse of candor whispers in your ear, swat it, take a long walk, a cold shower, and clear your head. This guideline relates to guideline number two. Nobody is thinking about you, unless you tell them about their faults. Then you can be sure they are thinking of you. They are thinking of killing you.
- 8 That's enough wisdom for now. I know younger people will not heed my advice anyway. So the guideline I offer them is: Don't. Go ahead and stay awake worrying what people are thinking about you, work on your weaknesses, and criticize your friends. It doesn't matter.
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