

“The Adventure of Aging”
Thoughts on the Ninetieth Birthday of Inge Elsas

July 8, 2005

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As we celebrate Inge's 90th birthday this Shabbat – and all weekend, really – I thought we might spend a few minutes considering “The Adventure of Aging.” I could have called these thoughts by many other things, like:

- The Journey of Aging
- The Art of Aging
- The Challenge of Aging
- The Agony and the Ecstasy of Aging
- Or simply, Aging – It Beats the Alternative

Perhaps better yet, try the observation of a 90-plus year old who admitted at her birthday party, “At least at my age, you're not subject to too much peer pressure!”

A “well seasoned” Groucho Marx once insisted to a reporter, “A man is only as old as the woman he feels!”

I find – incontestably – that the years zoom by so quickly, moving the modern quipster to observe:

The baby hasn't any hair,
The old man's head is just as bare,
between the cradle and the grave
lie but a haircut and a shave.

Those of you in your 20's and early 30's listen carefully: you will soon lose all control. Someone unknown to you will push the “Fast Forward” button on your life on or about your 35th birthday – give or take a candle.

Now, we'll get around to talking about Inge and her 90th birthday, but right now, I'm up to those of us “mere babies” in our 50's.

The other day, a friend sent me an e-mail entitled “The Perks of Being Over 50.” As far as this age-analyst could ascertain:

- Kidnappers are not very interested in you.
- In a hostage situation, you are likely to be released first.
- People call you at 9:00 p.m. and ask, “Did I wake you?”
- There's nothing left to learn the hard way.
- You can eat dinner at 4:00 p.m.
- You can live without sex, but not without your glasses.
- You have a party and the neighbors don't even realize it.
- Your eyes won't get *much* worse.
- And, your secrets are safe with your friends, because they can't remember them, either.

Now, let's move ahead.

When I consider those of us in our 60's, 70's, and 80's, I recall William Blake's difficult, yet profound observation that –

He who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in Eternity's sunrise.

Do you get it? Blake reminds us to savor the good and sweet moments that life affords. Don't squander an invitation to a dance. Pounce on the chance to celebrate anything upbeat and happy, because a whole lot of other much less pleasant stuff looms on the horizon.

Don't give up on life – here's your time to still be creative, to initiate a new chapter, to push on toward the as-yet untried and untested.

It is the opportune occasion to finally wise up and build a faith for ourselves, let go of our petty grudges, make peace with everyone and recognize that we're none of us perfect – not even you.

It's time to take to our awareness the fact that there never was and never will be a single prime time!

And, as Eda Leshan puts it:

Each stage of life brings with it both joy and pain,
confusion and wisdom, trauma and triumph...

And now, speaking of triumph – how about our beloved friend, Inge Elsas? Is she the perfect poster woman for inspiration and triumph, or what?

Earlier this week, a favorite old story came to mind while anticipating Inge's birthday celebration. You've probably heard this.

A man at the bar finished his second glass of beer and turned to ask the manager of the establishment, "How many kegs of beer do you sell here in a week?"

With not a little pride, the manager replied, "Thirty-five kegs a week!"

Well, the man at the bar then announced, "I've just thought of a way that you could sell 70 kegs a week."

To say the least, the proprietor's interest peaked and, with a sense of urgency, he immediately asked, "How? Tell me how!"

And the man at the bar replied, “It’s really very simple. Fill up the glasses!”

Never satisfied with her life as an unfilled glass, Inge fills her life to the brim with unceasing activity and selfless, unwavering outreach to others. Inge helps them enrich their lives and provides companionship to those who are lonely.

Inge Elsas’s 90 years include more distinctive and fascinating chapters than a Tolstoy novel. I won’t even begin to outline them all, except what I have personally witnessed these past few years – Inge in her loving, protective role as Henry’s wife, a mother, a grandmother, a teacher, a song leader, a lay-rabbi, an irreplaceable and proud Temple member, a student of Judaism, a lover of Israel, a guide to the hapless traveler, and a comforter of the sick and the frail. All of these more than demonstrate Inge’s unique vigor and boundless energy. We treasure her as one of the cornerstones of this congregation. She was one of the first to come forward to make her inspiring commitment to our new Capital Campaign, “To Cherish and Preserve.”

In years past, from time to time, Inge and Henry comprised the mid-week Festival Minyan all by themselves. Inge’s inspiring courage during Henry’s illness and then losing him; her bravery during her own sickness made her an unforgettable person in our lives.

Consider how Inge happily influences so many places in our community: at Waldenberg Village, at the J.C.C., and in so many service and cultural organizations in both the Jewish and the larger community!

How many children do you suppose Inge has taught in Temple Sinai’s Religious School through the years with such loving patience and devotion? How many elderly nursing home residents has she comforted with a cheerful visit and a happy song?

Many of you could recount your own stories about Inge. I’m not telling you all anything you don’t already know. Inge, we celebrate you tonight and we give great thanks for your uncommon example of living generously and loving constantly. And you’re *not* finished yet!

We depend on you to bring out the best in us! Though tiny in stature, you teach us to stand as true giants among men and women with your every breath and smile.

Join me now, as we offer this prayer and this blessing of Thanksgiving on this precious occasion.