



Special Report

Blowing Bubbles



A Course in Neotony
The Art of Staying Young Forever

WITHIN 15 MINUTES YOU WILL FEEL THE EXHILARATION OF CHILDHOOD, AND BE ABLE TO DUPLICATE THE FEELING FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE, ANYTIME YOU SO CHOOSE

WHAT IS NEOTONY?

By dictionary definition neotony is the retention of youthful qualities by adults. It's most often used in zoology to describe animals, like wolves that stay puppy-like. But Harvard Business School professors Warren.G. Bennis and Robert J. Thomas, authors of "Geeks and Geezers," expand the term to include human characteristics like playfulness, spirit, flexibility, fearlessness, warmth, and energy.

Margery Silver and Tom Perl, in chronicling a longitudinal study on longevity, find that these are the very characteristics that add to your lifespan. Bennis and Thomas identify them as traits necessary for lifelong business leadership.

HAVE A HUNGRY HEART

Neotony encompasses an eagerness to grow and to learn, to have a hungry heart. It elucidates in others a desire to nurture you, mentor you and protect you. Neotonous people frequently encounter unsolicited kindness in others. Some have postulated a scientific bases for this. Mothers nurture their babies because looking at the infant produces oxytocin, a

feel good hormone—the milk of human kindness is literally caused to flow in breastfeeding mothers. Neotonous adults have the power to bring instant joy to others without uttering a word, and so bring favor on to themselves.

ARE YOU 4 YEARS OLD OR 7 YEARS OLD?

A top executive entered therapy and when asked how it went for him, he answered, "Terrific. I became more like I was when I was four years old than when I was seven years old."

For adults, unconditional joy does not last long. In fact, we consider overly optimistic and constantly happy people to be some how defective. Early in life some one will burst your bubble, a mean spirited American idiom, that warns you not to become too comfortable while you are happy, thus eliminating any real chance for pure joy from the get go.

Imagine the days before you were given that long list of 'no-nos.' a time when all was right with the world, and even when not, the danger was intense, all consuming and momentary. You were four. By seven, after two years in school (for many of

today's children, four years in school) you lost your natural talent for joy. You were a crotchety seven year old, looking over your shoulder for what would likely bite you.

But at four, you had it all. That is to say, you had nothing and needed even less—just a chance to blow some bubbles would do. Take 15 minutes to return to the time when everything was all right.

Here's how.

STAGE 1-Alter your state

BLOW BUBBLES

So how do you feel now when you are blowing bubbles? Try it and see. There are no rules for how to blow them or what to feel. Can you deal with the no rules rule? Blow them and find out.

FALL STILL

A frequently used technique for focusing, relaxation, centering and renewal is “falling still.” Different disciplines use different names. One meditation group I know hold week sessions during which attendees spend two hours a morning in children's play. But they must spend one additional hour in stillness.

To fall still for a moment, sit up (it's not sleep—so don't lie down, although I often break that rule, myself.) Put both feet firmly on the floor, close your eyes and

guide your mind to a place you love, and just be still. You will feel refreshed.

When you open your eyes you will have a clean slate on which to write (think about your blowing bubbles experience. Was it fun, joyful, foolish, dumb? Did it make you feel lighter, happier, sillier, less pessimistic? Jacques Brell, in a timeless lyric, longs for the days when he could be “cute, cute, cute in a stupid ass way.”

CREATE SOMETHING-ANYTHING

Whether you had a good time or not, take a minute to create something— anything. When my daughter was four years old we found ourselves with a dozen other children locked out of a hotel day care center waiting for the staff to arrive. There was nothing, absolutely nothing with which to play. My daughter took a bunch of leaves and gave them to each child and they wordlessly pretended to play tennis as they had seen their parents do at the resort. They created tennis game that became so engrossing no one fussed while waiting for that door to open.

Do not look for supplies, do not put this on your “to do” list, do not expect to create the next big thing. Just make something.

FEEL THE ALTERATIONS IN YOUR STATE AND REMEMBER THEM IN THE BAD TIMES

You have just blown bubbles, fallen still

and created something out of not much. Do you feel good? Remember how it feels, and resolve to remind yourself that the feeling exists any time you want to reach for it. You can't wear it out or use it up. It can be regained when you are fired, are at a funeral, watching a sad movie, paying the bills, coping with anything any where at any time. It's ok to blow the bubbles, fall still and create something, but it's just as good to recall the feeling over and over again.

STAGE 2-Alter your thinking

STAND SOMETHING ON ITS HEAD

I visited the office of a renowned Alzheimer's researcher to interview him for an article on how baby boomers could help prevent the disease, or delay its onset. It took me a few moments to realize that all of the pictures in his office, including his diplomas, were hung up side down. He explained that this was only one way that he personally keeps his mind active. "I like to see things in new ways. Seeing things the same way all the time is never really seeing at all."

Look at something you see everyday and no longer really see. Turn it upside down. Now it's new. What do you see now? Leave it that way for a while. Next day turn it on its side.

What else would you like to take from the background of your life and turn upside

down? Examine it. Think differently. This not a metaphor for self analysis, it's just a simple way of jogging your thinking so it doesn't get stuck, stiff and stale. It's like clearing your drain or flossing your teeth, a good routine that keeps your mind in top shape.

TELL A DIFFERENT STORY

Sometimes we get stuck on very big things, or at least what we make up are very big things, We tell a big story so many times we believe only our version, which soon becomes fact. Often these are horrid stories of terrible crucibles: lack of love from parents or spouses, victimizations at work or from family, loss of money accompanied by self-blame or anger. We lead a regretful and solutionless life.

And although as Janet Landman, author of "Regret: The Persistence of the Possible," says, "Regret properly understood is the past alive in the present," that too can be turned on its head. Regret used creatively helps us understand our failures and do better next time. "As long as there's regret," says Landman, "there is hope."

The Chinese use the same word for crises as they do for opportunity. What is your bad story? Retell it, pulling from it all that was worthwhile. What have you learned from that terrible mistake, accident, influence, betrayal, wrong or loss? Stand it on

its head. What opportunities still exist from that crisis?

BLOW BUBBLES-AGAIN

Thank heaven—it's time to blow bubbles again. Just blow them.

DECLARE YOUR POSSIBILITIES

Now, what are your new possibilities? What can you create, retell, rethink, be? Admit it, you've been having some big thoughts as you do these tiny exercises. Let them come out and be the foundation of new possibilities. Fill in the blank, "My new possibility for doing is——." "My new possibility for being is ——."

STAGE 3-Alter your being

BEING-DOING HAVING-BE NEOTONOUS

We tend to live our lives and measure our success in terms of our doing and its results—what we have.

What if we measured success by how many good deeds we did for others, how often we inspired others? How present we were when we blew our bubbles? What if the entire sum and substance of our success and the success of others were measured by the number of joyous moments we had in our lives?

I know very rich children who are very happy—they dance and sing with abandon. I also have been with the children of the Kuna Indians of Panama, who fish with the plastic tape of discarded audiocassettes. They too dance and sing.



First, be a child (recall the feeling), then do like a child (blow more, bubbles), then have child like things, loved ones who nurture you, mentors who love you. Ultimately, the things are subordinate to the being and the doing.

DO SOMETHING ON A WHIM-THEN BE WHIMSICAL

Alas, we mostly get it backwards. Doing comes first. So let's go with the flow. Do something whimsical. Spin, fly a kite. Walk the dog and sing "How Much Is That Doggy In The Window?" (If you don't know the words, how about a chorus of "Rubber Ducky," or the theme from "Mr. Ed?") Pinch your own cheek. Blow another bubble-try to catch it. Wish upon a star. Call yourself a silly name and refer to yourself that way all day as you converse with the little voice in your head. The little voice says, "Boy your hair is really getting thin." You Reply, "Please address me as Mr. Stinky from now on." The little voice is flabbergasted, you failed to obsess over your hair lose. It starts to laugh, you laugh with it.

And there it is. As soon as we learn words we start to think in words. As soon as we think in words we speak to ourselves. As soon as we lose our neotony we start to say bad things to ourselves, most of which are silly and made up. Whimsy simply substitutes funny and good things for the sad and bad things we say to ourselves. Since both the downers and the uppers are largely made up, depending on whether we are currently wearing rose colored or dark glasses, we may as well slip on the rosies as often as possible.

You become whimsical in your thinking, like a child.

BE NEOTONOUS

When whimsy comes without effort, you will be neotonous in your being, forever blowing bubbles.

In the mean time, just repeat the three stages as often as you like.

