

# Holding Tight or Letting Go

BY STEPHEN HUYLER

Autumn is a time of mellow joys for some and melancholy for others, of holding tight and of letting go.

As the year begins to draw to a close and all the trees turn russet, orange, yellow, and brown, many mourn the coming of winter, the loss of spring's burgeoning growth and summer's brilliant days, seeming without end. Autumn can be a time of dread or of acceptance, even anticipation.

Leaves that cling to their branches, holding onto summer, must fall. It is inevitable. And yet we find beauty in their swirling descent, their dance in the wind, their patterns on the grass or streets, shored up against bushes and trunks. Upon the ground, they become food for more growth, insulation against the cold, part of a cycle of continuous renewal.

Many of us during the pandemic have learned to let go — of expectations of ourselves and of others, of rigid demands on how we look or behave. By enforced circumstance, we became introspective, reflective, reevaluating our priorities, and what truly matters to us.

Many have learned acceptance: growing at ease with our years and no longer needing to hide reality behind cosmetics, hair dye, a cap, or concealing fashions.

We seniors have matured in a world that has for generations proclaimed a false utopia of youth, valuing muscularity and curves, clear, unwrinkled skin, and full heads of ungreying hair over the natural, inevitable progress of time.

Gradually, thankfully, many of us elders are beginning to recognize and accept our age, whatever that might be, simply as our right. We no longer need ei-

ther pretense or proof that we are fine, even beautiful in our own ways, just as we are.

I wouldn't be twenty or even thirty or forty again for all the world. Sure, I have constant pains I couldn't conceive at that age. Yes, I must walk with care, watch how I sit, exercise more thoughtfully, and take supplements and prescriptions to keep my body in good balance. And yet I celebrate that I am no longer controlled by my hormones, that relinquishing many responsibilities has allowed my mind and worries to clear. I've had a full and rich life with its fair share of pain, loss, and anguish balanced by friendships, relationships, and experiences upon which I reflect with wonder. Did I really do all that?

How I see myself can limit my own future. I can hold tight to my past and how I've defined myself, or I can release those definitions and allow myself to be present now, just as I am, no veils, no hiding, me.

In the face of our youth-based society, self-acceptance is not easy. It requires vigilance and immeasurable self-forgiveness. The benefits are abundant and the strains of daily life, although not less physically challenging, are lessened.

As autumn surges forward and our environment begins to change in form and substance, can we like the trees let go gracefully and accept these new visions of ourselves?

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# CONNECTED SENIORS

BY AVERY HUNT

If you are over 55, chances are you may be widowed or divorced or still single – and those chances go up even higher as you push past 65. We all know that Maine is full of seniors. Statistics might surprise you even more. In fact, we're the "oldest" state in the union. Baby boomers (born between 1946 to 1964) make up 28% of all Americans. Maine has almost 37%. And consider this: 1 in 6 boomers these days live alone – more than any other generation. That can lead to loneliness or isolation

With all those daunting stats, how in the world do you meet other like-minded seniors? The good news is that aging boomers are often attracted to Maine because of our cultural, educational, and recreational amenities. Some are introduced to new people through friends. Others may meet through community and non-profit volunteer work, or from church to bingo to book clubs. A few may try to meet at restaurants or bars, which can be mighty uncomfortable. And still others go on those damnable "senior dating" websites, often with no success.

Enter *Connected* – a relatively new opportunity to meet other seniors in a comfortable setting. The group is based in Brunswick, and was started several years back

by two friends, Caron Grich and Dave Shulz, who first met in a grief support group when both had lost their spouses.

As friends, they soon cooked up the brilliant idea of holding monthly sessions for seniors – not in a grief setting – but built around an interesting speaker, as well as providing time for socialization and stimulating conversation before and after each presentation. Caron and Dave began holding meetings 2-1/2 years ago and were going great until COVID hit. Today, they are having open sessions and attracting even more people, somewhere between 25 and 40 at each meeting, and many are repeat visitors.





Connected is free and open to all, with no membership costs and no strings. Definitely not a dating situation; it's more comfortable and relaxed. Folks meet from 7-9pm, usually on the first Monday of the month. Light refreshments are provided, and costs are covered by small voluntary contributions and often by holding a simple raffle for something, usually connected to the speaker. For instance, when Becky Shepherd, the owner of Wild Oats, a popular local bakery, spoke at a recent meeting, she brought \$10 coupons for everyone and donated a \$50 coupon for the raffle.

Dave arranges for refreshments and organizes the space. The evening sessions take place in a meeting room at Brunswick's St. Borromeo's church, but the group is strictly non-denominational. Caron oversees the PR and events announcements and lines up the speakers. In the last couple of meetings they have welcomed a representative from Brunswick Landing (the commercial reinvention of the Old Brunswick Naval Base); the director of the Oratorio Chorale; a representative from MidCoast Fisheries, and the director of the Maine State Theatre, for example.

There is nothing quite like it in all of Maine. Carol hits the target with her usual sharp humor when she describes Connected as "Cheers, without the booze!" Although people have lots of internet connections, "there's nothing like face-to-face interaction."

"All the speakers have been good," says Pam Cormier of Bath, a frequent attendee. "There's never been a dud, plus it's nice to meet new people." For Joe Dionne of Topsham, married for 50 years and now a widower, "I hadn't mingled very much. But I found that this is an enjoyable way to get together and it's a fun group!" Reinhard Adler, also a widower and a retired Silicon Valley executive, agrees with Joe and then some. "Caron is terrific at finding interesting speakers, and Connected is a good opportunity to meet other people in similar circumstances." He also observes that Maine has more than our share of older singles and that such social gatherings are "good for our mental health."



# GO!