

Circuses, Monkeys and Teflon Raincoats

Summer holidays are made for slow, deep conversations, with time to ponder where life is going and what got us here. One night, over dinner, the question of who influences us, struck a chord.

There were memories of teachers, some wonderful, while others not so much. What qualities made the difference? Those who were passionate about what they taught instilled curiosity and a thirst for knowledge. My high school history teacher wrote screeds of boring notes on the blackboard for us to copy, but her stories made the origins of World War One come alive. The class of restless adolescents silently copied notes while she softly detailed what happened to Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie in Sarajevo, on 28th June 1914. Bare lists of dates, places and names were a framework upon which lives became real. The power of story to teach has always stayed with me.

Other influencers were Aunts, whose practical kitchen wisdom was borne of hard years on the farm. Aunt Kath had a fix for everything, from broken toes to broken hearts, from a tree full of ripe peaches to an empty pantry in the face of unexpected visitors. She taught that tough times are inevitably followed by good ones, and that the circle always comes around. She taught of community and the need to look out for one another – something that seems less common in these days when we often don't know our city neighbours. For Kath and Jack, farm life hinged on the quality of relationships with their community and they always made time for people.

And then there are partners, who, for better or worse and over time, we grow more alike. A ruby wedding anniversary prompted the question of what it takes for a marriage to last so long. He says it's working together, looking out for each other and giving each other room to grow. She says, wryly, that it's sticking around long enough for the years to pass.

Family, friends, colleagues and bosses all make an impact on our lives. Some are examples to follow and others we want to avoid, as often as possible.

American author, Jim Rohn, famously suggested that we are the average of the five people we spend the most time with. Habits are bound to rub off when that's what you are exposed to most often. Research shows that if your friends

are overweight, then there's a pretty good chance that you will be too. Or if people in your inner circle exercise, then you likely will too. That's a bit tough if you want to make change. Those closest to you won't necessarily want to change, so their support for you might be a bit slow in coming. After all, if you stop eating chocolate cake where does that leave them? Guilt ridden? Defiant? No wonder we fall off the wagon so readily. The same goes for opinions and attitudes. You'll likely have similar political tendencies and hold strong opinions about the same issues.

It's tricky, as you can't always control who you spend time with. Work colleagues and some family members can be the worst, and there may be no escape! Fuelled by wine, horror stories filled our dinner conversation. The mother-in-law for whom we were never good enough. The energy vampire friend who was constantly negative. The boss who said one thing and did the opposite.

But it turns out that Jim Rohn is only partially right. It's not just the five people closest to you who hold sway, it's their friends too. The people who influence them also indirectly have an effect on you. Be careful who you associate with!

Eventually, of course, the conversation turned to the deliberate act of choosing connections that are healthy and helpful. Inviting people into our lives who add tremendous value and who have our best interests at heart. People with whom we have fun, draw comfort and offer mutual support. It sounds a bit clinical to intentionally set out to cultivate great relationships, but life is too short to settle for relationships that drag you down. Decluttering your stuff is currently wildly popular, so why not apply the same principle to relationships? How can you limit your exposure to the toxic ones? Can you remove them completely? And if not, how do you protect yourself?

On my fridge, is a small cut-out person, made from a kitchen baking sheet. It came from my friend Cath, with the reminder that sometimes you need to wear your Teflon raincoat and let other people's 'stuff' slide off. Putting on the mental raincoat is a useful image. At some point, we've all been made miserable by taking on whatever others dump on us. Some things you can dodge, but when you



can't, let it go by. Sounds easy, takes practice, and you'll need to remind yourself every time. Somehow we forget to set boundaries with the people closest to us, perhaps instead operating under the misguided assumption that we can't do so. As the saying goes, 'not my circus, not my monkeys.' You don't have to accept everything that gets dumped in your lap. Make room for better.

In this noisy but separated world, it's no surprise that finding new friends, connections and influencers can be quite a challenge. I regularly hear from baby boomers who ask, 'where do I go to meet people?' Hobby groups and service clubs used to be an easy way to meet like-minded others, but fewer of us are involved in that way now. Book clubs, choirs, tai chi and meet-up groups are still a good way to get out and get active with people you might not ordinarily come across. Community newspapers list groups and events. All you need is the courage to go the first few times.

Twice a month I work with a group of women who meet in Hamilton, after work, for interesting conversation, laughter and connection. They've made new friends and enjoy provoking their thinking. No Teflon coats needed here.

The old adage suggests that 'to have a good friend, first be one.' So, before you go looking for new connections, take a look in the mirror. Are you the positive influence you seek in others? Do you listen well? Are you trustworthy? Do you

have your friend's back? In short, are you the kind of friend that you would want to have?

It's not about perfection. Several years ago, my closest friend and I fell out with each other. It was devastating and took more than a year before we could speak again and many more months to heal. We are both grateful that the friendship mattered enough to mend and that pride eventually took second place. This friendship challenges me on so many levels, yet the growth and the connection it offers is like no other. We learned anew that great relationships are not always easy, and that they deserve all the effort we can give them.

Take a close look at the people you spend most time with. They influence your thinking, your habits and your actions. If you want life to be different or better, then who will support that change? Do you honestly give and get what is needed?

It's the start of a fresh year, with time to focus on who you aspire to become. Surround yourself with those who will help you on your way. Make sure the circuses and monkeys are of your choosing.



Jenny Magee

Jenny Magee works with Boomers to make the most of the second half of their lives. Her latest book **A Bold Life - How Boomer Women are Reinventing Life Beyond Fifty** is available at good bookstores or from www.jennymagee.com If you are looking to make significant changes, contact **Jenny** via email to jenny@jennymagee.com

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