

EPISODE 217**[INTRODUCTION]**

[0:00:02.6] PF: Welcome to Episode 217 of Live Happy Now. I'm your host, Paula Felps, thanking you for joining us today. You've heard the phrase, 'You're not getting older, you're getting better.' But how often do you believe that? Well, after hearing today's guest, you're going to see aging in a whole new way. Dr. Louise Aronson is a geriatrician, writer and professor of medicine at the university of California, San Francisco. Her new book, *Elderhood: Redefining Aging, Transforming Medicine, Reimagining Life*, gives us a completely new perspective on aging.

Let's listen as she explains how changing our attitude toward aging can transform the path we're all on.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:40.8] PF: Louise, thank you so much for sitting down with us today, I really appreciate it and I'm excited to talk about this topic.

[0:00:47.2] LA: I'm excited too.

[0:00:49.0] PF: You know, your book gives us a lot to think about in terms of aging. I think for myself as I was reading it and getting through it. I think we really want to know what inspired you to write it because it is a huge subject.

[0:01:01.8] LA: It is a huge subject and I guess that's part of why I wrote it. I mean, you see lots of books about childhood and adulthood, this sort of period in human history where in an unprecedented way, more of us are living decades in elderhood. I mean, really, longer than we spend in childhood and for some of us, as long as we spend in adulthood, you just don't really hear about elderhood in the same way.

You hear about old age or silver tsunamis. You hear little bits but it's not all pulled together in a way that gives it the same respect and attention that earlier phases of life do. I just thought I would try and do

that which admittedly is like a crazy thing to have tried to do but somehow in the end, it worked, although there was a long time where I thought this is insane, why am I trying to do this?

[0:01:51.2] PF: Well, first of all, you did an excellent job, this is a tome, this is so insightful and there's so many layers to it. It's really not the kind of book you can just sit down and give a cursory read and be like, "All right, I've mastered this." It really has like I said, it's just so much to digest and when you talk about elderhood, can you clarify what exactly you mean by that?

[0:02:14.1] LA: Elderhood as sort of an equivalent to childhood and adulthood. I'm not the first to have done this but thinking about life as having three major stages. You have the childhood stage where you're basically developing. From a little tiny infant into an adult and then you have adulthood where you start really young and you end up at — having often people have families, they have the main parts of their careers.

Then it used to be that most people died, actually, most people died in childhood or adulthood but now, actually, the vast majority of us then enter this third phase which is always existed just not in such numbers and that's elderhood. You know, it pretty much seems to start somewhere between the ages of 60 and 70 which is a shock to many people because they think of old as that thing that happens to you right before you die and that's old age.

[0:03:08.9] PF: Always to someone else, right? Not to me.

[0:03:11.4] LA: Totally, yes. No, it's hysterical, you line a bunch of people up and then another bunch of people will look at them, they'll easily identify who is old but they won't identify themselves that way, even if the people they're calling old are younger than they are.

This is something we've done to ourselves, right? I start the book with just talk about the words old and elder. Elder is like respect and wisdom and power and all this sort of stuff and old is just bad and wrinkled and sad and they actually mean the exact same thing. All the badness about old, a lot of it we're putting on that ourselves. In some ways, that's tragic and in other ways, it's good because it means, now that elderhood and old age last decades, we can start seeing it new ways.

I mean, childhood didn't really exist until the late 1800s and adolescence didn't exist until late 50, 70 years ago. Elderhood is just like the next frontier for human beings. What are the sub stages, how long do we live in it? How do we make the best of it? It's a very exciting time.

[0:04:13.1] PF: But we tend to not think of it as an exciting time as we are approaching it. Now, I know people who are in those later phases of life who are having a blast. I was talking to an 87 year old woman last week who she's like, "Honey, I look good, I feel good," I'm like, "You go."

As we're approaching that, it's like, "Oh my God, no. Don't push me into that category." Most of us, I don't think we're excited about the idea of entering elderhood. How do we start changing that perception?

[0:04:45.1] LA: Well, I think that's why I wrote the book now because although, I'm a geriatrician, I really think that when I decided to work with old people, it was sort of like deciding to work with people in some country that I could visit but I would never actually be of like that country. I don't know what I was thinking.

If you had told me this, I would have said no, no, no. But clearly, that's what I was thinking because I'm in my 50s now and as things begin to change, I was like, "Wait, you mean me?" I started making all those comments that we all make, particularly around my 20 something year old medical students that I work with. I realized, wow. This is how it begins and this is how we make it bad.

Because even as my body disappoints, you know, in various ways from appearance to function. Most of my life is so much better and it's so much better in part because I'm a lucky person obviously, in society I have a good job and a house and all those things. It's also better because I don't worry as much about making a certain sort of impression or achieving certain sorts of things. I worry about what really has meaning to me and this has been found across people, except for the most impoverished.

That you get a better sense of yourself and what matters and you make better choices and you feel better about yourself and your life. Yet, people don't believe it, there's a great journalist called Judy Graham who covers aging for Kaiser Health News and she read an article about a month ago about how

older people 70s, 80s et cetera, rating their health is really quite good, the majority of them do and people look at them and they're like, what, are you kidding?

She said, the first comments on her Facebook page were like denial, denial, denial. It's actually part of this thing where you look and you say, "Hey, this is pretty good." You spend a lot more time appreciating what's good and what matters and you waste whole lot energy on the stuff that's less good and do doesn't really matter in the end. That makes people happier.

[0:06:53.3] PF: That is really good to hear because I think a lot of us have this perception that okay, you get old, you sit around, you talk about your aches and pains, you talk about how many times he went to the bathroom and that's what that life is, you know? The reality is very different because as you've pointed out, we're living decades in elderhood and we're living fulfilling lives, we're not just sitting around waiting for a shuffleboard to start, you know? People are really being out there and being active.

[0:07:22.2] LA: Right, in so many ways but there are also sub-stages of aging. I mean, some people are looking forward to shuffle board and that's okay if that's what they like, right? I also think some people do discuss their aches and pains and things but I think there are two reasons for that. One is that we have a created a society that's built for childhood and adulthood. You know, it's not welcoming to people, particularly they get into the later stages of elderhood. Maybe there are stares, maybe you can't hear anything, maybe everybody stares at you because they think you shouldn't be there, you know?

Then that limits the people's options artificially. It's not about their age, it's about the world we've created and so that really makes their world smaller, what we call life space, really small and narrow. We're sort of inflicting this thing on age and then blaming age for something that has is a cultural choice because you can go to places where that choice has not been made and people are much happier and more engaged in a variety of ways.

The second thing is, we make fun of people for talking about their aches and pains. We don't make fun of adults for talking about how they spend much of their days. We have medicalized old age so people spend time dealing with it. You know, people in my age group and adulthood, we talk about our jobs a lot because we spend a lot of time doing it. Kids talk about school a lot, we don't make fun of adults for talking about work or kids for talking about school.

In old age, some of it is, it has to do with health. Why are people not allowed to talk about the thing that is happening in their days, like they get ridiculed. We're not going to ridicule a kid for telling you what happened in fifth grade. I just feel like there are ways in which we set ourselves up to be ridiculed and to be just treated unfairly as we age and we can just decide not to.

[0:09:04.9] PF: That is really great insight and I think it's probably very interesting for a lot of our listeners because many of them are at a stage where they're probably dealing with aging parents and at the same time, knowing, we're marching down that same path behind them. How do we then start recognizing that, recognizing how we view aging and start changing that?

[0:09:29.2] LA: Well, I figured, unless I was going to be the world's greatest hypocrite, I had to start doing it myself to write this book. I started catching myself when I would make those little comments about aging or you know, the students going running, I can't do that anymore. I always temper it by saying something that's much better about my life now.

That refrain has kind of gotten into my head where I realize, yeah, this is good and they begin to see it differently too like they will literally stop and look, sometimes I go but this is so much better. Because they never hear that. And so I want them to know that if we're running down the block, they're going to get there first, no question. In so many other things, I have them beat and that's fine because they're going to get there too. Part of it is changing the message inside your head and this is all the more important because there's a researcher at Yale, I talk about this in the book who has looked at people who have positive attitudes about aging and people with negative attitudes.

The people with the more negative attitudes, when they get sick, recover less well, they get heart disease seven years earlier, they're more likely to have Alzheimer's markers in their spinal fluid. All kinds of bad things, it's almost like it's self fulfilling. Some of that, we don't totally know why but there are mechanisms you can imagine such as if you think life is worth living, if you think elderhood is good and offers you opportunities, you're probably going to take better care of yourself and you're going to say like, "Wow, I can't do that anymore." You're not going to say, "I'm old, I'm going to stop doing it." You can say like, "Can I do that differently? Do I need to go get some help so I can keep doing that?"

You're going to be more proactive. I think that makes a big difference. There are so many ways that we can help ourselves with attitude and also, planning for the future, the happiest people through all stages of elderhood are ones who continue to have goals and purpose. Those can be big or small but it's when you wake up in the morning you think, "Today, I'm doing something." That's meaning full to you and then you'd get up and you go after it.

[0:11:27.8] PF: How important is that for us to develop those habits now? Because I don't think you want to wake up when you're 80 and say, "You know what? I think I'm going to start having purpose. I think I'm going to start setting goals," you know? How do people in any stage in life, kind of start setting up their life for that type of elderhood?

[0:11:47.7] LA: That's such a good question. I think first is to really notice what you really enjoy. There are the things we tell ourselves that we like or that are important and then there are the things like, students will often call it the Saturday morning test. Let's say you wake up at five on a Saturday morning, which of course they stare at me in horror but anyway, I actually like to do that.

And the family or whoever you live with is asleep and what is it that you really want to be doing. So something that just makes you happy even if other people are looking at it might think it was work and that could be chopping the logs outside. It could be writing a book, in my case. It could be any number of things and think about those happy things and how those can be built into your goals. Start adding it to your life in some of what's your free time.

So that your whole identity isn't your job or a family that might grow up and move away or something like that. Really starting early because here's the thing, it's just not about being 80. It is about being 62. A study last year showed that men who retire at 62 are much more likely to die in the next year and the theory is the stress of lack of purpose and identity. So knowing who you are and what's next on your agenda is so important.

[0:13:05.0] PF: And how do you do that if you are very tied up in your job because many people at this stage of life are as you mentioned? We do talk about our work a lot and we're in a society where work is very much emphasized. So how do we start pursuing things beyond that to know that we've got a bigger picture than who our job is?

[0:13:28.4] LA: Yeah, I think a few things. One is notice what you like best about the job because all jobs have good parts and bad parts and maybe it is not the job in particular. Maybe the thing you like best about the job is the interacting with other people or maybe this you like best is not interacting with anyone, that time. It all depends on who you are.

[0:13:44.9] PF: Being in a cubicle all by myself.

[0:13:47.5] LA: Yeah, exactly. I mean we are all different right? So finding out something and then starting to look around to see what other opportunities there are and these can be jobs as we traditional define them, which is paid work, et cetera but it can also be – I mean people in their 70s are one of the fastest growing segments of entrepreneurs and they are the fastest growing segment of the workforce and that is going in in different ways.

Like people who are social are driving airport shuttles and they make a little extra money or ride share and they get to talk to a different person every half an hour and if you are a people person that's a great option. Or you volunteer somewhere where you are doing good but you are also interacting and if you are not a people person, you could be fixing something or making something. There are so many different options but noticing what you like best.

And then maybe trying to find some time to do it and then even if you really don't have the capacity for that, then when you retire at least set up a plan for going to investigate things. Like you think you might like to work with kids. Find all the people who are doing anything with kids in your region and go after it. You want to work with computers? Same thing. And just have a plan where every week you're exploring a few different things and then maybe something you've never done before.

Like, "Oh I never went hiking," or I don't know, something wild and crazy and just do it but have a plan and have a schedule and put it on the calendar and then follow through.

[0:15:16.8] PF: Yeah because we plan for our retirement financially, you know? We make sure we've invested in that but I don't think we necessarily plan for it emotionally or mentally and that we are really prepared for what that phase of life is going to be like for us.

[0:15:31.3] LA: Yeah and people often find themselves in a big vacuum. Now, some people love that I actually have several friends in their early 60s whose husbands retired a couple of years ago and one spent a year reading math text books, which apparently made him very happy although the rest of us couldn't understand that. Another one just walks around, made meals and saw every movie that ever was and his wife thought, "My God, where has my husband gone?" But then he reappeared at about month 14.

You know, so there are a variety of different ways and sometimes people just need to decompress before they can figure out what they're doing but notice how each of those guys knew what they wanted. One wanted to be outdoors and he wanted to use his hands instead of his brain for work and he wanted to see all the movies that he had missed and then another one just love math and let himself do that in his adult life and so went crazy.

So it can take any form but it reconstitutes you and then you look up and you say, "And now what for me? What's my next phase?" because if you are in your 60s or 70s chances are you're going to live decades longer and you need some purpose in that to make those years meaningful. There is meaningful as you make them and to some extent, how your health lets them be but it is also through the people who are more engaged. They're healthier longer and active longer. So it's reciprocal in both directions.

[0:16:50.0] PF: And it feels like things are really changing right now. Your book being one of the indicators of that change because we are addressing it. I don't think there's really been a clear cut path like, "Hey this is a new form of aging. This is a new world for us" and I think there's a lot of people that are out in this frontier going like, "I don't know what we're supposed to do. We're going to live forever," you know? What do we do with all these time?

[0:17:16.7] LA: Right, some people want to live forever but so far, you know mortality is holding steady at a 100% so I don't think we should be planning for that yet but we should be planning for decades and we also need a language for it like think about the first 18 years of life. You've got neo-nate, infant, toddler, young kid, kid, tween, teen, young adult and then you're like 18 years old. Meanwhile you turn 65 and this is like old and that holds until you're 115. That's just not helpful.

So we need to really think about what are these different sub-stages and how also is elderhood different from other phases? Like in elderhood, you can actually age or develop backwards. So somebody can get sick or need chemo or maybe get depressed after retiring and seem more frail or less able to do things and then they get better and they seem what we might call “younger”. But it’s really just more vibrant and engaged.

And other ages you can’t really move both directions. So there are ways in which elderhood is unique and special and we need to explore that and then also set ourselves up as a society and as individuals to really thrive because each family like as they come to the crisis point of advanced old age and care, every family suffers alone even though it is a universal problem and we don’t tend to do that for other phases of life.

It is completely unnecessary suffering. You know there are the parts that come with being alive and then there are the parts that we do with that policies and communities not doing as much as they could.

[0:18:48.1] PF: And I think aging is unique in the sense that every other phase of our life I guess if you’re a child, well when are you going to start school. When are you going to start driving? When are you going to go to college? You know you have all of these milestones and once you hit retirement, we kind of start losing those and what role does that plan in our – I mean we’ve always got this carrot like, “Oh this is the next thing I am going to,” and then all of a sudden there is no carrot, how does that affect us?

[0:19:16.5] LA: Right, well I think it depresses a lot of people but I also think there might be some unrecognized carrots and then there might be some sort of existential work that would make everybody feel better. So in terms of unrecognized carrots, I have rarely met a person that doesn’t absolutely fundamentally love being a grandparent, in a way that they have never loved another role. So being a grandparent and you’re a different grandparent for each grandkid you have.

Now not everybody is going to have that experience but that is a pretty wonderful thing to look forward to. There are also all these on encore careers or volunteer opportunities or art opportunities or physical opportunities with this sense of how much we can do with our bodies and old age, there are some

people getting fit for the first time in their lives in their 70s or 80s and just learning and growing. You know people learning to use instruments.

We say you can't do that but actually you can. It is a matter of deciding to. So what is it you've never had time to do because you were busy having a job or raising a family or all the other things you were doing that you now get to do? That's a carrot. Is there a different career where you get to go in at 10 and you leave at three? I mean that's pretty nice, you know? Is there a way that you're going to stand out in your local community?

Like there are people near where I live. They are all these staircases with planting around and they make them look absolutely gorgeous. It starts looking one way and they can just walk down the street every day and see the fruits of their labor and see the rest of us pleased by it. I mean there is so many things, big and small and then as things get harder, there are milestones and they're not necessarily happy ones but they are important ones.

Like where are you going to live when you need more help? Who is going to be part of that? How do you want to live the very end of your life and how do you want to die and those aren't as exciting necessarily as I am not pretending they are. It's like planning your wedding or whatever but they are at least as important. We all die, right? So the only way you get an ending that is what you want and have your best chances of avoiding those things you don't want is really by planning and by involving others and if we just talk about it more normally and really let people plan and discuss and be clear about what they want and don't want, it would be less scary.

And this have been proven in communities where people have these conversations. There's a place in Wisconsin, there is a place in Colorado. There are other countries that do this very well. People have much better endings of their lives. You know, meaningful family rich, relatively pain free.

All of those things, endings. And you are going to die either way. So why not have that be something to work towards doing well also and having control over? I really think we're at this pivot point as a society and the more we can all embrace it and own it and say like I get a lot of pushback from people, "I am 78 but I am not old," but yes you are old and if being 78 is great for you, then being old is great.

Let's talk about that. Let's not deny. You know if we make old bad then old is bad. Whereas if we just make old a stage of life, like young, like middle-aged then it could be all the things it is, which is sometimes totally wonderful and sometimes really hard and that's the same for all stages of life.

[0:22:27.5] PF: What is the thing that we can do better to really set ourselves up for a happy, healthy elderhood?

[0:22:34.8] LA: Realize that it could be the best time of your life and plan like you expect it to be.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:22:44.0] PF: That was Louise Aronson talking to us about how we can enjoy a happier elderhood. If you like to learn more about Louise and her book, *Elderhood: Redefining Aging, Transforming Medicine, Reimagining Life*, please visit us at livehappynow.com and we'll tell you how you can learn more about Louise, her book and the work she's doing.

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That is all we have time for today. We'll meet you here again next week for an all new episode and until then, this is Paula Felps reminding you to make every day a happy one.

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