Growing old gracefully

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It’s a loaded phrase for women of a certain age to be told they’re “aging gracefully.” Usually it means they look young for their age, as if showing signs of growing old is a bad thing. Since the ramifications of the aging process are inevitable, that message has fostered a multi-billion dollar industry aimed to counter its effects (projected at $216 billion for 2016, according to Zion Market Research). As a result, there’s a myriad of elixirs and treatments geared to augment, suction, peel, boost, tuck and enhance.

“Companies are making millions on lotions, potions and hair color,” said Kerry Temple-Wood, owner of the 63rd Street Yoga Studio in Niwot, who specializes in yoga for women 50 and older. With each ad for Retin-A, liposuction and breast implants, the message to women is clear: you’re not okay the way you are. “And not just that you’re not okay, but that you should be 20. I’m not 20; I wouldn’t want to be 20. The aging woman—we are the discards of society.”

Temple-Wood, who’s 60, calls the media’s negative messaging about aging and its impacts on our collective self-worth, an unhealthy epidemic. We’re literally taught not to accept an inescapable process, when the post-50 years “set the stage for an empowering and remarkable journey of self-discovery,” she said.

Women embark on a deep process of self-evaluation at mid-life because the camera lens that’s been focused on family and child-rearing has turned back on them. “They’re looking at their gifts and learning to embrace the aging process, because this is part of [their] evolutionary growth as women,” Temple-Wood said.
She prescribes a journey of self-exploration without judgment—don’t be in a hurry, she cautioned, because it’s not typically a straight line, but a varied path of zigs and zags, false starts and ups and downs. Some women pick up threads forgotten since childhood, or take up volunteerism and other hobbies.

“My mother went back to school in her 50s and started a new career, and later…in her 60s started to do a very intricate kind of hand-stitched quilting—each quilt would take a year to make,” Temple-Wood said. A lot of people start writing projects. Or “sometimes you try something new and it’s ‘been there done that,’ and so you try a different door.”

She also offers a program called the Art of Conscious Aging, which helps women in menopause navigate the physical and emotional changes of this transitional period in their lives. Along with the biological changes, there can be a perceived loss of sexual potency. “They see that men don’t hold the door for them anymore, or that they don’t get the looks they used to,” she said. These are uncharted waters, certainly, but there’s a lot of freedom in not being bound by biological forces. Some women find that as they age they become less accommodating, for example. “Boundaries—they're powerful things,” she said.

Midlife can also be a time that people strive to redefine their notion of work. “I try to help them open up that concept of what work means; at 55 at 65 at 70—how can we be of service to society when it doesn’t necessarily have to be about money?” Temple-Wood asked.

For a lot of people that can mean the pursuit of a creative outlet. “I see again and again the creative process coming alive after being channeled elsewhere for many years.” For Temple-Wood, who raised three daughters, “That creative spark got redirected and it raised a family. There’s so much about [being a mother] that’s creative, the intellect, the passion it takes to raise a family with integrity, and as much consciousness as we can bring to bear.”

Often mothers struggle with an empty nest in their 50s, and the menopause process begins with a sense of loss over a rewarding but bygone era. Grief is often joined by uncomfortable feelings of anger and fear.

“Menopause is an initiation by fire—literally,” Temple-Wood explained, “but [society] wants to drug it up, pretend it doesn’t exist.” Women, she continued, have no road map for how to navigate what’s happening to them because the culture has buried it under the rug. So many women can feel alone while they struggle with insomnia, hot flashes, mood swings and other biological factors, like a decrease in sex drive. And while a doctor can prescribe hormone replacement therapy and creams, they often don’t have the time to sit back and listen, and offer emotional support.

“I recommend that you resource yourself,” Temple-Wood said. “You build a team,” which might consist of a therapist, a doctor, friends and colleagues, books and articles. “Your whole body is becoming rewired—it takes some time to get to know the new you.”
She’s not a therapist; instead Temple-Wood describes herself as a mentor, offering clients support and a place to share their experiences. “I might show them to a [metaphorical] door, but it’s up to them to open it and walk through.”

She tells clients it’s natural to feel lost at this time in life, that “they should ask questions, try 10 different doors—there’s so much that’s new that shakes the foundation, it’s natural for people to flail around for a while.”

The 50s is a decade about discernment, Temple-Wood continued. “We ask ourselves, ‘do I believe this?’ or, ‘is this something I really want to do?’ ‘All that is not true falls away,’ is a motto she’s adopted for the conscious aging process.

She added that the honoring of the “saging process” is very important for both women and men, but while a man can be termed a silver fox, women are shunned for going gray.

“There’s so much shame and denial, because our culture is so youth-focused,” Temple-Wood added. “When [a woman] shifts past that 45-[year-old] mark, all of a sudden men don’t interact with her the same way. If there’s fear for women, there’s more for single women because we’re so programmed. To be intimate with a man, with the wrinkles and sagginess in our 50s and 60s [and beyond], can feel extremely threatening. That vulnerability at this time of life isn’t something that’s talked about.”

If her clients are struggling with those fears she tells them, “I hear that, I understand.” But what she sees, typically, isn’t the fearful inner child buried inside—“what I see is this beautiful lady who’s rare and raw and powerful.”

Temple-Wood’s studio is located at 6541 N 63rd St. in Niwot. Call 303-818-0519 or email tmplwd@q.com for more information, or visit www.TheArtofConsciousAging.com.