

A looooong life

October 28, 2008

At least that's what a life-expectancy calculator claims. Thing is, I'm not so sure I want to live that long.

I don't remember where I found it—oops, there goes my memory; maybe I'm farther along than I thought—but I read about a computer program that calculates how long you're supposed to live. It's located at www.livingto100.com, and it takes just a few minutes to complete. So, I tried it. Twice.

First time, I finished the test, and the next screen told me, "Your calculated age is 97." So, either I'm a pretty well-preserved 97-year-old who can't (a) explain why I'm older than my mother and the same age as my grandmother and (b) account for 45 years, or else those folks at livingto100.com need somebody to check their grammar. I think what they meant is that, according to the way I answered all their questions, they believe I can live to 97.

What did I do wrong?

You'd think I'd my first thought would be, "Yippee, I've got 45 more years to live!" But you'd be wrong. I first thought was, "Man, I must've fibbed on a few of those answers." See, I know how people answer surveys. If another person is asking questions, like in a mall or on the phone, they tend to lean toward saying what the pollster wants to hear. And if they take a poll online, they tend to say what they wish were the truth.

So, I went back and re-took the test. The second time, I didn't give myself the benefit of the doubt. Like on how many times a week I really work out. (I changed my answer from "3-4 times a week" to "1-2 times a week." Really, some weeks I work out 4-5 times, and sometimes, it's only once.) Or

like how many times I eat any food that is white and, presumably, starchy. (Can't remember the options—that memory thing again—but they really didn't offer one that fits me.)

When I finished the test the second time, the helpful folks at livingto100.com made me register before guessing how loudly my biological clock is ticking. Then they got personal. The next page exclaimed: "Hello MarvKnox Your calculated age is 97. ... You could live to 102. Learn how. ... Remember, a strong network of friends, family and community is key to longevity. Get started now!"

I hope they know their medical wellness better than they know their punctuation. And I wonder if they really think I've got up to 50 more years in me or if they're trying to butter me up to sell me something. I'm guessing the former, because if they were trying to up-sell me, they'd do better if they scared the bejabbers out of me. According to their "age calculator," I've been doing just dandy without them.

What are the odds?

Who knows if I've really got a chance to live to 97. Grammar, my mother's mother, has made it that far, and according to what I learned in high school biology class, she contributed 25 percent of my genetic structure. Also, long walks with Grammar during childhood instilled a lifelong love of exercise, so I've got that going for me, too.

Besides "clean" genes with no cancer smudges, I'd almost bet the non-smoking thing accounts for the high number the calculator tabulated. During lunch today, I heard a guy on the radio talking about statistics. He said smoking increases your chances of contracting lung cancer by 2,000 percent.

A balanced outlook on life

Pondering the possibility of living to 97 got me to thinking about several things:

- Take good care of yourself. We know enough about the human body to realize a balanced diet and exercise can not only result in a higher quantity of years, but they also enrich the quality of those years. And although we usually use the term "mental gymnastics" negatively, regular periods of rigorous thinking—like working puzzles or learning something new—also contribute to aging gracefully.
- But don't worship your health. Even if you contribute by exercising and eating right, good health is a gift from God. I've seen folks, even Christians, who get so absorbed in trying to be healthy that they wind up making an idol out of their bodies and worshipping at the altar of wellness. Our bodies should be tools to glorify God, not self.
- If I have to lose something, I hope it's my hearing. Maybe because my sister, Martha, has been deaf all her life, I'm not scared of losing my hearing. She's led a full and productive life, and I can imagine feeling fulfilled without hearing new things. I'll still hum Lyle Lovett songs if I'm deaf as a post. But I sure wouldn't want to lose my eyesight. Too many books; too little time. Even if I live to be as old as Methusaleh, I'll never read all the books that intrigue me.
- I'm not so sure I want to be 97, much less 102. If I outlive Joanna, my wife, and my peer friends, then all those years might feel like too much of a good thing. If I lose too much mental or physical ability, I could become a burden to others, not to mention myself. But if I can remain aware, contribute to others and appreciate each day, then maybe living to be super old would be interesting.
- Don't count those years before they're lived. A few minutes ago, I e-mailed a note to an acquaintance and fellow father whose 18-year-old

daughter died in a car accident Sunday afternoon. A whopping score on a life-expectancy calculator means nothing. Life could end at any time.

- So, savor the moments. I don't know many people who look back and treasure entire years. People who love life love the moments—mealtimes with family, spectacular sunsets, autumn afternoons, long runs in the morning, rousing worship, card games with friends, good books, great music, the symphony of friends' laughter. No matter how long, a life filled with these will be a blessing.