

HOLISTIC NEW ENGLAND

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# *spirit of change*

## MAGAZINE



## Healthy Aging

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Medicine, Hope and Kundalini Yoga: An Interview With Hari Kirin Kaur Khalsa

A Collective Vision Of Life On Earth • Probiotics 101: Your Brain, Your Gut, Your Microflora

## Walking in the March of Time

by Mark Mathew Braunstein

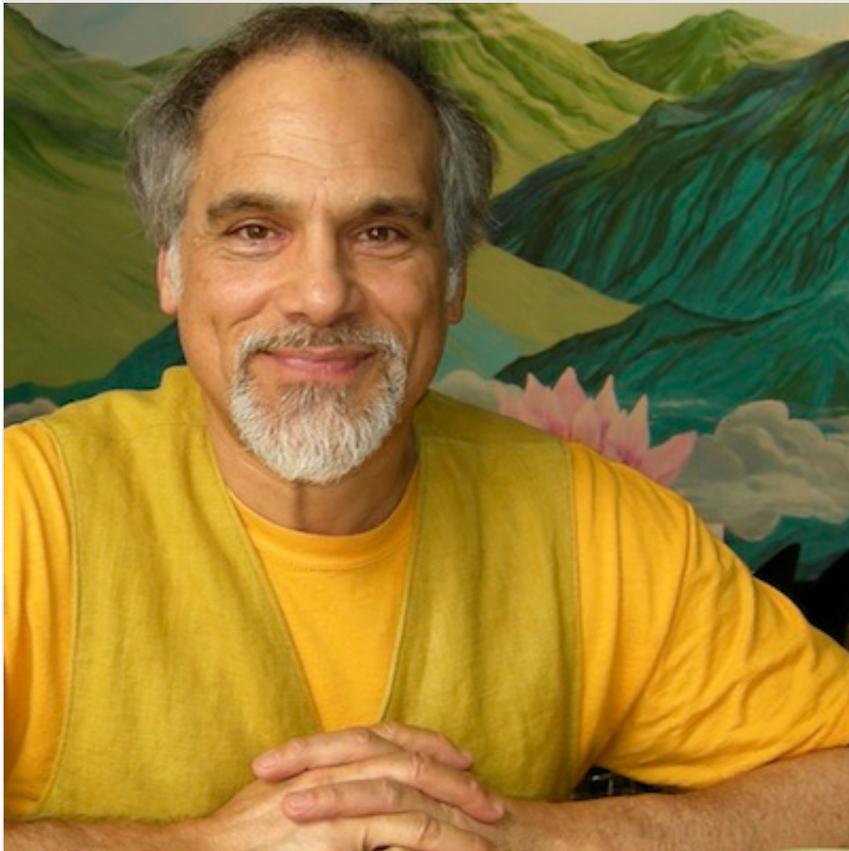


Photo by Leslie Watkins

I became an old man in the blink of an eye. At age 39, I experienced instant old age when I dived off a footbridge into a river and did not land right. The impact broke my back, which injured my spinal cord, which paralyzed me below the waist.

A quarter of a century later, I am facing induction into the ranks of senior citizenry yet again, this second time so gradually and so subtly that I barely notice its incremental steps. Deaf to the faint ticking of my biological clock, I also am blind to the wrinkles etching that familiar face that greets me every morning in my bathroom mirror. Perhaps that steamy mirror works like a facial cream that claims to eliminate only the appearance of wrinkles without claiming to actually remove the wrinkles themselves. Attendants at museums and theaters who view me directly nevertheless grant me admission discounts. Unlike my mirror, they now officiate

my status as an elder.

More poignantly, my generation now is succumbing to fatal illnesses associated with old age, and the pages in my ledger of lifelong friends are dwindling. In recent issues of my college alumni magazine, the obits for my fallen classmates outnumber the entries boasting the meager accomplishments of the living. My senior class has ripened into senior citizens.

We can brace ourselves when facing the loss of family members and friends as they age and die. Meanwhile as we age but do not yet die, we must adjust to our loss of bone density and muscle mass. As we learn to act our age, we no longer may be able to ski the Laurentian Mountains or to hike the Appalachian Trail or to run the Boston Marathon. Instead we can walk half a marathon, or halfway around the block. No matter how brief our action or short our distance, we all enlist in the march of time.

I do not observe the march of time while seated on the sidelines. In the physical rehab ward, I took a stand against spinal cord injury. I began to creep, then to crawl, then to stand up and inch forward with the aid of a metal walker, then to walk slowly with leg braces and crutches. While I relinquish title as a healthy and sexy sexagenarian athlete, I instead lay claim to being a healthy and fit sexagenarian paraplegic. I use a wheelchair at home, but outside my home wherever I go, I walk.

Whereas I previously backpacked the Grand Canyon from rim to river to rim, and ascended several presidential summits of the White Mountains, I now am happy to go for a walk just down the block or along the woodland trail behind my home. My walking is like your cross-country skiing, all uphill. That I have not suffered from most of the grave health complications of paraplegia, I attribute to my high raw vegan diet and to my full body workout while walking.

Often climbing stairs rather than nearby elevators, I embarrass those lazybones who take the elevators. When standing still, I need grip only one crutch, so can employ the other hand for chores. Bystanders offer me a helping hand when they see me clumsily bagging produce and haphazardly placing the bags into my cart, but I politely decline and explain that food shopping is an integral part of my exercise program. While my gait with crutches and leg

braces is always slow and sometimes unsteady, nevertheless I walk. One of my greatest joys is walking in nature, whether the desert or a forest, whether the seashore or a city park. As a born-again pedestrian, I enjoy walking even in a parking lot. I probably would enjoy even walking the plank.

If we were to rank one form of exercise above any other, that likely would be walking. While calisthenics, aerobics, gymnastics, athletics, aquatics, and acrobatics may build greater strength or more agility or longer endurance, we hardly engage in any of those as consistently as we do walking. Indeed, walking is what gets us to the gym or to the track or to the pool and then back home again. Even walking into and out of cars is still walking.

Walking is our most ancient mode of transportation, and our most basic. By the time you are one year old, you take your first baby steps. By the time you are two, your walking needs little guidance or assistance. By three years old, you are a master. As a master walker, you do not need walking shoes or running shoes or any shoes. You need only your two feet.

The health benefits of walking are well documented. Walking at a moderate pace for merely half an hour daily boosts energy and stimulates metabolism and circulation throughout our day, and can lower blood pressure and reduce the risk of diabetes and osteoporosis throughout our lives. Recent studies have confirmed what has long been assumed, that walking is a stimulus for creative thought. (Many of the ideas for this very essay dawned upon me while walking in the woods.) Psychologists further counsel that we can walk our blues away, that going for a walk guards against stress and depression. Just thinking about not walking should be enough to make anyone feel stressed or depressed.

No need to weep nor to workout when we can walk. Modern medicine has intervened with new and remarkable ways to prolong our verticality. Thanks to joint replacement surgery, the elderly now can remain ambulatory, whereas previously their arthritic knees landed them in wheelchairs, or their fractured hips delivered them to their graves. Less than 24 hours out of surgery for hip fractures, patients are led out of bed and made to walk, albeit very short walks just around the hospital bed. Expressed in an idiom of the Sixties and apt advice for aging hippies in or past their own sixties: Keep on Truckin'.

As we creep toward that final stage along life's way, if our walking weakens and falters we can resort to mechanical aids to bolster us. First a cane, then a crutch, then two crutches, then a walker. If we become so infirm that we can walk only from bedroom to bathroom to bedroom, walking will remain the one physical activity to which we glorious elders will cling until the very end of our lives. But if blessed with healthy aging, the more fortunate among us will go walking to our graves.

As we age, we may walk and fall, and walk and fall, and walk and fall. But better to walk and fall than no longer to walk at all.

*Mark Mathew Braunstein is the author of three books and contributor to many magazines, including **Backpacker**, **Natural Health**, **Vegetarian Times**, and the disability monthly **New Mobility**.*