

Sweet as Figs in Autumn

What's the best part about living in Vero Beach? We've heard people offer many reasons why this place is terrific ... golf courses, beaches, sunshine, the quiet, the unhurried pace. All these are undoubtedly draws to Vero Beach, and rightfully so. But if you asked us, we might offer an additional reason that would surprise you. Another reason to love Vero Beach is because of the chance we have here to meet so many people who are retired, or nearly so, and who have therefore had long years of opportunity to become who they are going to become. In other words, we get to see lives at their fulfillment.

Several decades ago a prominent psychologist, Erik Erikson, talked about how lives ought to look at fulfillment. He outlined stages of psychosocial development which he said predictably appeared as human beings progressed from infancy on through life to their senior years. At each stage, Erikson claimed, a challenge needed to be met; and if it was met successfully, the individual developed a virtue to carry into subsequent stages. Of course, whether or not the virtue developed, the individual grew older and advanced to the next chronological stage. But unless the virtue of each stage was developed, the individual went on with diminished capacity to meet later challenges.

The virtues which Erikson proposed were developed by stages were as follows: Infants must develop hope, toddlers develop will, preschoolers develop purpose, children develop competence, adolescents develop fidelity, young adults develop love, middle aged adults develop care, and finally senior adults develop wisdom. According to Erikson, a life which has successfully met all developmental challenges will demonstrate the entire range of virtues at its fulfillment.

Think for a moment about all the senior adults you have the privilege to know here in Vero Beach. Their lives may vary significantly in detail, but don't many of them nevertheless share the profound distinction of demonstrating the full range of Erikson's virtues? And aren't all of our lives, regardless of our ages, richer and more satisfying because we have the opportunity to observe those well-lived, productive, mature and accomplished examples all around us?

Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, wrote, "A Man in His Life" in which he tries to capture in poetic imagery the wonder and beauty of an older life at its fulfillment. He writes of an individual near his life's end with these words: "His soul is seasoned/ His soul is very professional/ He will die as figs die in autumn/ Shriveled and full of himself and sweet/ The leaves growing dry on the ground/ The bare branches pointing to the place where there's time for everything."

We think Amichai is on to something here with his description of maturity. Living in Vero Beach is wonderful for many reasons, but perhaps the most wonderful reason of all is the opportunity we have to witness many richly fulfilled, mature lives. They are lives grown sweet and full as figs in autumn; lives that seem to point us confidently toward eternity.