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It is a mistake to regard age as a downhill grade toward dissolution. The reverse is true. As one grows older, one climbs with surprising strides.

George Sand (1804-1876)



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Perseverance, Faith and Health in the Face of Adversity

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Kristo, “The Apostle”, as he calls himself, is a pleasant and gregarious man – taking every opportunity to tease, joke, or even tell an old war story. His demeanor is congenial with everyone around him and his reactions are inherently pleasant and nonjudgmental.

Kristo is 2nd generation Albanian - but not by much! His parents came to America not long before he was born, in 1924, so he had the upbringing of a first generation immigrant. From middle school to his early thirties he noted that his race was a constant source of discrimination and torment, especially among the heavily Irish community that he was surrounded by in Boston. Kristo is Greek Christian Orthodox, which was also a minority at the time. He had many physical altercations through his early life because of his ethnicity, race, and religion. He dropped out of high school early because of bigotry felt from a teacher, and it was then that he joined the armed forces.

He did later acquire tutoring services to receive his high school diploma, but only after he returned from service after suffering a gunshot wound that sent him home; that was as far as he took his formal education. He went on to work as a firefighter in Boston and later moved to Norwell, where he continued his career until retiring at age 65. Discrimination led to him losing one firefighter position in Boston when he defended his honor in the face of torment, which unfortunately escalated to a physical altercation. However, he eventually worked up to serving as president of the firefighter’s union – demonstrating that he was able to overcome these barriers. Fortunately today he enjoys a peaceful retirement and the days of bigotry are behind him.

Kristo appears to be a healthy looking elderly gentleman, and if you were to ask him, he would quickly tell you he is fine and has no issues. Upon closer inspection, however, you would note that he walks with a significant limp due to a stiff right leg; he attributes this to a stroke he suffered in his 60s but his medical charts attribute it to questionable spinal stenosis. Further prodding would slowly reveal that he suffers consistently from episodes of vertigo and dizziness, which have led to multiple falls. On one occasion a fall resulted in a subdural hematoma for which he received a craniotomy. Kristo has repeatedly been started on physical therapy but he maintains that he doesn’t need it; he soon quits and dismisses the home care professional. His blood pressure has not been well controlled and remains his single most active problem. I went over the Epley maneuver, or repositioning maneuver, that is used to treat benign paroxysmal positional vertigo (BPPV)) during our initial visit and gave him materials for home.

Later Kristo reported that he has finally had relief with the vertigo for the first time in years, which was reassuring - his exercises are apparently helping. Treating the vertigo along with the blood pressure is expected to improve his balance and gait which will go a long way in reducing falls.

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Kristo seeks his primary care physician (PCP) to manage his health and healthcare. He has always abided by evidence-based medicine but is deeply rooted in his faith. He provided an amazing example of this: after his initial visit with me, when I had noted prominent right lower lobe rales on his exam, as did his PCP, he placed a religious medallion on a long band and hung it from his neck so that it was in the area that we heard the potential pathology. He went for an x-ray, which ended up showing nothing. He believes that an angel is and was with him. Furthermore, Kristo assures me that he is open to ancillary medical and home services should he one day require them. As a start, he had the first floor of his home updated to allow easy access and living for him. He now sleeps and lives exclusively on the first floor while his wife still sleeps upstairs. The bathroom has also been updated with wider spaces and safety handles.

Kristo's values led him to look for success where many might only see failure. When he was disabled, he found ways to meet his friends for their get-togethers; when his ability to walk declined, he found closer golf courses; when his vision declined, he pursued medical advice; when his education was cut-short because of bigotry, he took a different path and eventually completed his high school education. Many forks mark his life but all have one thing in common: Kristo never gave up and always stayed grounded in his values and principles. He has faced every challenge, whether in a relationship or in his own health, head-on, and he has never backed down. I found inspiration where I did not anticipate.

I couldn't help but draw the connections between Kristo's life and my own in terms of our upbringing and experience as immigrants. It led me to notice the differences in how immigrants experience the healthcare system and perceive their own health. Kristo somehow arrived at the conclusion of having faith in the healthcare system. He does not experience anxiety or depression and is not afraid of death. He has invested time and energy developing his faith, which he believes has facilitated his healing throughout his life, perhaps without him even being conscious of this effect at the time. I feel, in turn, very fortunate to have met Kristo and to have had the opportunity and privilege to share in a small portion of his healthcare and to have learned valuable lessons from him.