

Good Morning, Gertrude.



Every morning I see her. She is as consistent as Al Roker's silly jokes and my son's breakfast choice (always oatmeal). When I moved into my neighborhood in Orange two and a half years ago she was the first person I met. Her name is Gertrude* and she is in her nineties. Her constant partner is named Tulia Pie, a white and brown Shih Tzu dog.

Gertrude introduced herself one afternoon as I swept out my garage. "Hello!" she called out to me from the sidewalk. I honestly didn't want to chat. I was busy. A single mom who just moved her two kids; two dogs and rabbit into a new house had a lot to do. Motivated solely by guilt, I put down my broom and walked over to meet her.

At a rapid pace – impressive for a woman of her age – she told me her life story. She is one of the "originals owners." That's one of three categories of people in our neighborhood: original owners, Chapman students or young families. She said she had moved here with her husband, who died many years ago. She talked about him with a broad smile and big animated motions. Then she told me her daughter and son-in-law lived with her. Her daughter has to use a cane to walk, but she is a wonderful daughter and gets around pretty well despite her handicap.

Her son-in-law, who has cancer and was in hospice, he too is wonderful, and the nurses and staff where he is are just wonderful and take good care of him.

As she spoke to me that morning one prevailing sentiment was repeated over and over – wonderful.

Life is wonderful according to Gertrude.

It's obviously not perfect. She knows that, having experienced loss and disappointment, but it is still wonderful.

Every story she told, no matter the outcome, she always ended on a positive note.

Thinking she might be getting tired of standing out in the hot sun, and Tulia Pie pulling on her leash, I asked the "time to end this chat" question. But she didn't bite and asked about me.

"I just moved here with my two kids," I told her. "I'm divorced." Oh she thought this was the perfect neighborhood for a divorcee – safe and friendly, with two former sheriff's deputies on the street. "I work at the O.C. Register," I continued. That is usually met with mixed reactions, but Gertrude thought that was ... you guessed it, "Just wonderful!"

We said our goodbyes and I watched her walk away, she continue chatting, but now it was directed at Tulia Pie.

I've seen her most mornings since then. She has her routine. She is always dressed well, in pastel blue elastic-waist pants, a crisp cotton shirt with little flowers and white nurse-type shoes. If she needs it, she wears a light white sweater across her tiny shoulders like a shawl, clinging to her by one button. She walks confidently, but with grace and caution. She told me she used to walk miles every day, but after she fell a few years ago, her family will now only let her walk our cul-de-sac. So that's what she does and it's "wonderful" (naturally).

My Facebook feed is filled with pictures of sunsets or oceans with inspirational sayings splashed across them. Friends comment with things like, "So true" or "Good to remember" to even the most basic platitudes. Life coaching has become a \$1 billion a year industry. One can download apps that send you daily affirmations, or that track your workout, or enable you to listen to podcasts of a favorite self-help book.

But I'm beginning to suspect that sweet Gertrude has the key to what we are all striving for, a happy life. It's simple really; get out and exercise every day, have a positive attitude and a grateful heart, connect with your neighbors and community and, of course, own a dog.

I often find myself humming the song made popular when she was a young girl called "Look for the Silver Lining" when I see her.

"Look for the silver lining

When e'er a cloud appears in the blue

Remember somewhere the sun is shining,

And so the right thing to do,

Is make it shine for you"

She's a constant reminder to me to check my attitude. As I'm hurrying my kids along in the morning, she passes my kitchen window and it makes me think of how quickly this time in my life will pass. As I pile the kids into the car, a mess of lunch boxes, unbrushed hair (we'll brush it in the car) and backpacks I stop and say, "Good morning, Gertrude" and it instantly grounds me. I remember. Isn't life wonderful?

"A heart, full of joy and gladness,

Will always banish sadness and strife

So always look for the silver lining,

And try to find the sunny side of life"

*Name changed to protect her privacy

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