

Living Life Well

Windows upon a possible world

By Jim Shere

The village schoolhouse in Hessel seemed nothing like it did when I was small. There was now the smell of paint and scattered scraps of lumber, as it was being remodeled into a bed-and-breakfast. But as we stepped through the doorway, I suddenly felt myself brought back more than half a century. My world was then barely more than these walls, and these windows that opened to a world beyond. I had been asked to come and tell what it was like back when this was my school, when kindly Mrs. Watson had helped us learn to write with pens dipped into inkwells, and to read what she had written in cursive on the blackboards.

I found myself drawn to a spot in the room just about where my desk had been in the fourth grade. I looked up and out the tall window, its glass wavy with age, and for a moment I was nine years old again, chin in hand, staring out and wondering what was beyond the window, and what the future might hold for a farm boy in Sonoma County. The owner pointed to the sturdy tree that rose outside the window. “Do you know how old that tree is?” she asked. I smiled, a memory unfolding. “Arbor Day, April 28th, 1950,” I said; “I helped plant it.”

The years since then passed, bringing me to Analy High in Sebastopol, and then on to Santa Rosa Junior College. And while I grew and was changed by what I learned, the world continued to change around me as well. The war in Korea was winding down, and tension was building up elsewhere in Southeast

Asia. My mother, who was born and grew up in China, helped me understand why her father — my grandfather — had gone there to teach, attracted to the unfolding opportunities there, only to find himself caught up in the growing political turmoil of an emerging nation.

Charles Ellis Crane — I inherited his middle name as my own — believed education would inevitably create a better world, and he wanted to be a part of that. Then, Chiang Kai-Shek rose to guide popular resistance to the burgeoning incursion of communism, and when students were taken from my grandfather’s classroom to be executed in the schoolyard, he quickly packed up his family and brought them back to Berkeley — a much safer, respected, cosmopolitan university town.

My grandfather’s grandfather, Robert Crane, had been a leader of men who did well in the goldfields. When he stopped in Sonoma on his way back to San Francisco, General Vallejo told him to invest in California real estate, so he established a ranch on the western slope of Sonoma Mountain, and prospered. My mother’s side of the family were ranchers, staunch Lincoln Republicans, and went on to do well throughout the following years.

My father, however, was a young and hopeful Okie when he arrived much later, looking for a fair shake in California during the Great Depression. He was a Democrat and a man among men who believed hard work would see him through hard times. My parents met in Monterey, my mother a poet living among the

bohemians of Carmel, and my father a roustabout working for Doc Ricketts in Cannery Row. He became a journeyman and a union man, but he always struggled, and fought battles I didn’t then quite understand.

Like my grandfather, I also found my way to Berkeley, a town that was forever changing. Its educated and cultured character was always dynamic, and always ready to challenge the status quo. I arrived in 1960 and was immediately caught up in the student demonstrations against the Congressional House Un-American Activities Committee hearings in San Francisco, at the tail end of McCarthyism. Fire hoses were turned on the students, washing them down the marble stairs of the city hall. This inaugurated the incredible Sixties, and my coming of age.

There were teach-ins to protest the war in Vietnam, as we begged our friends not to board the buses bound for basic training. Traveling through the Deep South, I saw a far greater, darker presence of hatred lurking in our nation than I had ever known before. During the Free Speech Movement back in Berkeley, I faced Governor Reagan from a picket line on Oxford Street, who acknowledged me with his lifted middle finger. He was trespassing in our world, and we were angry. We chanted “the whole world is watching” as our nonviolence was met by their violence, because now there were television cameras — and what was happening in Berkeley was being seen in living rooms everywhere else.

My world felt galvanized against what seemed a political evil, with courageous inroads made in a hard struggle against great odds. We fought against the war and for

civil rights, and it was hard — but it was possible. Like my father in his struggles, we all fought hard throughout that terrible decade, from the congressional hearings in San Francisco in 1960 to Kent State in 1970. People died in those days — not many, and yet too many. 1970 was also the year my first child was born, as I stood watching the sun rise through the window of a hospital waiting room, filled with hope for a new life in a better time.

I came back to Sonoma County to raise my children where I had grown. My practice as a psychotherapist also grew over the decades, and I came to appreciate the enormous variety and depth of human desires and troubles. A retired CHP officer once came to see me, suffering severe anxiety and an advanced case of post-traumatic stress disorder. He had been among those deployed to Berkeley by Reagan, “Blue Meanies” in their blue jumpsuits with their shields and masks, wielding batons and canisters of tear gas. Together he and I relived his deeply scarred memories and worked hard to find an eventual peace for him — and for me a sobering comprehension of the struggles that we all face, yet still never fully understand.

Now, I stand with the young father that I once was in that hospital waiting room, and with the farm boy in that classroom looking out the window for the life that he would live, and I tell them that I’ve seen it — I’ve seen what they were looking for. I tell them that it is hard, but it is possible. Like the tree we had planted outside that classroom window, it would all be possible. And I tell you, who reads these words during these terrible struggles of today: It will be hard, but I know it will be possible.

Avoiding Risky Substances: A Key Step Toward Healthy Aging

By Dr. Raj Kalra

As we get older, many of us focus more on staying active, clear-minded, and independent for as long as possible. Healthy eating, regular movement, and good sleep habits all play a role in helping us feel our best. But there’s another area that’s just as important — being mindful of how certain substances may affect us differently with age.

Alcohol, tobacco, certain medications, and even cannabis products can have a stronger impact on older adults than they once did. Our bodies change over time, and we tend to process these substances more slowly. What once felt fine might now lead to dizziness, sleep issues, or a greater risk of falls — sometimes without us even realizing it.

Take alcohol, for instance. It’s something many people enjoy

socially. But as we age, even light drinking can interfere with medications, disturb sleep, and affect balance. For those managing chronic conditions or memory concerns, cutting back — or skipping it altogether — might lead to feeling more steady, well-rested, and alert.

Tobacco, whether smoked or vaped, also takes a toll. It’s well known to harm the lungs and heart, but it can also weaken the immune system and may contribute to cognitive decline. The encouraging news is that quitting makes a difference at any age. Many older adults who stop smoking find they breathe more easily and feel more energetic, sometimes in just a few weeks.

Prescription medications can present their own challenges. Many seniors take multiple prescriptions, and some — such as sleep aids, sedatives, or strong pain relievers — can cause grogginess or confu-

sion. This increases the risk of falls and may affect overall quality of life. That’s why it’s wise to regularly check in with a doctor or pharmacist to review your medications and see if adjustments can be made.

Cannabis use has also become more common among older adults seeking relief from pain, anxiety, or sleep difficulties. While it may help some people, products containing THC can impact coordination, memory, or mood. As always, it’s best to consult with a trusted healthcare provider before trying something new, to ensure it’s a safe and appropriate choice.

Avoiding or reducing the use of certain substances isn’t about judgment — it’s about protecting your health, confidence, and daily well-being. Even small changes, made gradually, can lead to meaningful improvements. That might mean skipping that extra evening drink,

adjusting medications that make you feel foggy, or taking the first step toward quitting tobacco.

Healthy aging isn’t only about what we add to our routines — it’s also about knowing what to let go of. By staying informed and making thoughtful choices, we give ourselves the best chance to feel strong, safe, and engaged in life for years to come.

Dr. Raj Kalra is a board-certified physician in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, Pain Medicine, Lifestyle Medicine, and Obesity Medicine. He is the founder of Aroha Memory Care, a wellness-based memory care community opening soon in Sonoma Valley. Aroha integrates lifestyle medicine, compassionate care, thoughtful design, and innovative technology to help seniors live well and with purpose. Learn more at www.arohamemorycare.com.