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Exceptional Exceptions: The Trailblazers of Our Future

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I've got three new heroes. The first one is smart, spunky, and stylish. That she's also slightly deaf and a little wobbly on her feet didn't stop her from suing the government of the United States. As you may have noticed, Edie Windsor (<http://bit.ly/11sChcX>) has recently been on the front page of many newspapers, magazines and blogs as the plaintiff in the provocative Supreme Court case that could possibly strike down the Defense of Marriage Act of 1996.

Gender politics aside, I was struck by the fact that an 83 year old woman stands boldly at the center of the ongoing battle to legalize same sex marriage. Her feistiness and courage go against every single stereotype I hold on what it's like to be in your 9th decade of life. And I like that.

I recently attended an experimental modern dance performance that featured an exploration of the human form in its unclothed, honest beauty. It was directed by 93-year-old Anna Halprin (<http://tinyurl.com/ctxycxy>), who still works every day to spread her artistic vision. I have the great privilege of knowing Anna personally and have seen firsthand that she has battled and overcome cancer as well as the grief and sadness of the passing of her beloved husband. Anna also suffers from advanced arthritis that can be very debilitating. Yet she still wakes up every day to teach dance, choreograph new work and even perform all over the world to sold-out crowds. And, as the performance I attended demonstrates, she still gets a kick out of shocking her audience. Whether I enjoyed her artistic statement doesn't really matter. The real point is that Anna Halprin continues to pursue her passion, all the while tearing down the stereotypes of what is possible to achieve when you're in your 10th decade of life. This inspires me, and that's why Anna Halprin is also my elder hero.

My third new hero is popular actress and comedian, Betty White (<http://tinyurl.com/c3vms5z>). She is a terrific example of a bawdy comedic actress performing in her 90s with no retirement in sight. She also has an incredibly positive spirit that resonates with young and old alike. Her willingness to laugh at life and even herself hits a nerve with audiences throughout the world. Recently chosen by Reuters as the most trusted and

admired celebrity, Ms. White leverages her celebrity to draw a spotlight to another of her passions: animal rights.

Sure, there have always been some over-achievers—women and men alike—who have lived long lives. Mother Teresa helmed the Missionaries of Charity well into her 80s. Maggie Kuhn founded the radical Gray Panthers at age 65 and kept fighting ageism until she passed away at age 89. Pablo Picasso continued to create art in his 10th decade of life. Jimmy Carter received the Nobel Peace Prize at 80 and, whether you agree or disagree with his positions, one must be impressed with his tireless work for peace throughout the globe at age 88. Warren Buffett, at 82, continues to be one of the most influential business leaders in the U.S.

But these individuals are still exceptional exceptions. I've been spending a lot of time recently thinking about what life looks like when you're in your 80s and 90s. In my early 60s, I'm not anywhere near there yet, but I'm keeping my eyes open for some great role models of what potentially awaits me. Unfortunately, what I mostly notice is far too many long lived people with no clear vision of who they might *be* in this stage of their lives: how they might spend their time, share their talents and influence their family, friends and community.

In the past few decades, we've done a pretty good job of redefining the 60s and 70s as a time to stay engaged and productive; it's assumed that many of us will not only live that long but be actively involved in life, from creating encore careers to learning new skills, from visiting foreign lands to contributing back to the world.

But what happens when you hit 80, 90 or 100? More and more of us are, in fact, doing so yet the 80s, 90s and beyond remain mostly uncharted waters. It wasn't that long ago that most of us expected to be dead by the time we hit 80. If we lived longer than this, just being alive was considered enough of an achievement. That's no longer the case.

This last year I have been feeling the need for role models that can show me—show *us*--what 80, 90 and beyond might look like. If I am lucky enough to live that long and be healthy, I want to feel like I can find both meaning and purpose in my life. Then I watched the YouTube clip of Edie Windsor standing on the steps of the Supreme Court building, with her bright coral scarf waving in the March breeze, proudly wearing the diamond circle pin that her partner gave her because an engagement ring would have raised too many questions, and proving that you're never too old to change not just your own life but the lives of those around you and maybe even how an entire country views an issue. And I realized, "Now *there's* someone to learn from!"

Similarly, when I attended that dance performance directed by Anna Halprin. She's beautiful and vibrant *because* she continues in her own way to send a positive message to the world. She has said, "I don't necessarily feel old but I do feel an urgency to live every day to its fullest – to accomplish the things I want to get done." That's how I hope to feel when I'm 93.

And Betty White. When she appeared on Saturday Night Live, I thought, "Who wouldn't want to have the energy, spunk and ambition she has! Plus she seems to be having a wonderful time."

So maybe the biggest contribution these three women can make is that they give me hope. They give *us* hope. They're trailblazing the path forward to what it can mean to be 83, 93 or maybe even 103. And as a boomer woman--who like the 40 million other women who are part of my generation--will likely live well into my 80s, 90s and beyond--I need a vision of what the future might hold for me. I need some role models—elder heroes—and a new image of what these later years in life might potentially hold.

Who are *your* elder heroes? Who inspires you on the next stage of our life journey?