

Rustproofing People: Beans or Beef?

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I don't see many ads anymore for "rustproofing" your car. Perhaps that occurs automatically on the assembly line now.

But that's the term I use—"rustproofing people"—to describe preventative steps we might take to keep ourselves looking better and lasting longer. I prefer it to "wellness."

There is an emphasis on prevention these days, and that's a good thing. But a caution. To be overly concerned at a fad or fetish level with health, germs, dirt, cholesterol, cardiac output, resting pulse, high- and low-density lipids, plaques arterial or dental, teeth whiteness, or running when walking would do has its hazards too.

It can create a sanitary, sterile, prophylactic, almost Spartan lifestyle devoid of all spontaneity and joy or any risk at all.

So my plea is for simple, common sense moderation in both directions.

It is difficult to know exactly what "healthy" is because the rules keep changing. One week caffeine is bad for you, the next week it is good for you. One month dark chocolate clogs arteries, the next month it clears arteries. Remember the cranberry scare? And the supermarkets are 75% gluten free when less

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than 1% of the population has celiac disease. What are they going to do with all that food when next month's one-minute medical report on the evening news says gluten is good for you and without it you will be gluten deficient?

The morbid obsession of eating nothing but "healthy food" has become more common and even has a name—orthorexia nervosa—with dangerous consequences. Diets proliferate. There is one now called the Paleolithic diet (Paleo for short). It suggests we eat as our long-distant primitive ancestors did. One problem though. As I recall, our ancestors didn't live that long. Life expectancy at the turn of this century was 45 years.

What I favor is moderation in both directions, between beans and beef, stress and distress, fun and fatigue, seriousness and silliness, wearing boots and going barefoot, living and making a living. Watching our collective risks must never replace, in its entirety, watching sunsets (maybe even sometimes without a hat or sun screen).

Without being reckless, taking some risks can add a bit of spice to life.

My mother was in a nursing home for the last several years of her 99¾-year life span. One day the local Harley motorcycle group offered a ride to any resident who wanted to take one. My mom was first in line. One of the fellows drove up with a sidecar. "Sidecar, heck," Mom said, "I want to ride on the back of a Harley." Another fellow obliged. "Where to, Grandma?" he asked. "Anywhere we can get a Manhattan," came the quick reply.

Imagine that. Both the nursing home and

my mom taking that risk. It is a highlight of her life story she told everyone and it has provided a precious memory for all of us.

It reminds me of the "If I had my life to live over again" piece in which the person says she would "start barefooted earlier in the spring, and stay that way later in the fall. I would go to more dances. I would ride merry-go-rounds. I'd pick more daisies."

As for me, if I had it to do over again I would take flying lessons and also buy a boat. I would actually use a sick day rather than always showing up. I would take more family vacations and attend fewer professional conventions. I'd sit by the waterfall more and at my computer less. In reality, though, I would change very little. It's been a wonderful trip especially because of the people I have been privileged to live with and love.

So my advice for rustproofing ourselves is to balance reasonable concerns and interventions regarding symptoms and disease with sensible prevention efforts based on proven results and reliable data rather than rumor, hearsay, slogans, the evening news, or advertising lest we substitute new wives' tales for old wives' tales. Pick a good, conservative doctor. Eat wisely but tastefully with portion control. Fasten your seatbelts. Stay active physically (sometimes the yard is as good as the gym) and stay active mentally (maybe crosswords rather than the tube).

That way one can combine a mellow—"relaxed, at ease, and pleasantly convivial"—lifestyle with a healthy one and enjoy some beans, some beef, and many sunsets.

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