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Conversations About Aging

Loring “Bob” Newcomb, 94

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OPEN Welcome to Conversations About Aging, a Catching Health podcast. I’m Diane Atwood and traveling throughout my home state of Maine talking to people 60 and above about what it’s like to be getting older. Today’s conversation is with Loring Newcomb, who’s in his 90s. His friends and family call him Bob. Bob has lots of friends, especially lady friends, which he says suits him just fine. He’s got plenty of family around, too, including a sister who just turned 100, four children, 13 grandchildren, 15 great grandchildren, and one great great grandchild.

Bob’s daughter Lee and I go way way back and she recommended him for an interview because she says he’s like the energizer bunny, puts her to shame. In fact, until a few months ago, he was still doing volunteer work for the American Legion. Lee joined us for our conversation, occasionally adding a word or two, but mostly learning a few things about her dad that she didn’t know. We all sat in the living room of Bob’s quite comfortable apartment in a senior community in southern Maine.

Diane: So this is a place where a lot of people who are about your age live? You have to be over 50 to live here. You’re slightly over 50.

Bob: I’m slightly over 50.

Diane: How old are you now?

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Bob: 94.

Diane: Wow. So you've got some good genes. I must have. Have other people in your family lived as long as you have?

Bob: I have a sister in the nursing home right now who is, she'll be 100 in December.

Diane: No kidding. 100 years old. Is that, do you have a goal to get to be 100?

Bob: No I have no goals. Fine, day by day. I just, as long as I have my faculties. I could live for 200, but...

Diane: 200 huh? Yeah. Have you lived in a place like this for the last several years and?

Bob: Oh, only the last what? Two years, two and a half.

Diane: Before that, did you live in your own home?

Bob: No, I was living with the wife of a friend of mine who died. We were friends, the four of us. And her husband died and my wife died so we decided to spend time together. So we spent 10 years together. It was kind of a love-hate thing.

Diane: But still companionship is important.

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Bob: Very, very important. Yeah.

Diane: Is that why you decided, the two of you, that you would be together, you would live together?

Bob: Well, we knew that she would kind of have a hard time for a few years, so we decided we would share the wealth together.

Diane: Did it work out all right do you think?

Bob: Oh, yeah, it did, yeah, for a while, 10 years.

Diane: And then did she pass away or did you break up?

Bob: No we broke up? Yeah.

Diane: And then you're on your own again? Ayuh. What's it like to be in your 90s and to be on your own? I know you have family but to live alone?

Bob: I'm not crazy but it's, it's dull. I don't, you know, I don't do much. But the people who live here are great people. Everybody looks out for each other. Anybody needs anything it's you've got it right here with somebody. It is very nice here.

Diane: But you have your own apartment. Do you have any shared spaces? Do you do a lot of things with the other people?

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Bob: We have a room upstairs on the second floor that we all get together, year, and we also if the weather is good, there's a bunch of us up on the outside deck and tell stories and that's fun.

Diane: That's good. You know, the reason that I started doing these interviews is because I went to a conference about aging. And they talked a lot about how many older people suffer from loneliness, yeah, and isolation and I just thought about, I could visualize, you know, like somebody like yourself, you have a lovely apartment and you have friends. Yeah. But are you lonely?

Bob: Yes. I miss a female companion

Diane: Any good candidates here?

Bob: There could be, I, the way the setup is here. I think it would be dangerous.

Diane: You mean pit one woman against the other? Yeah, yeah. Where were you born?

Bob: North Anson, Maine

Diane: North Anson? Where's that?

Bob: Oh, it's up around Fairfield, in that area.

Diane: And did you come from a large family?

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Bob: There were five in our family. Three boys and two girls.

Diane: Where were you in the mix?

Bob: I was the baby.

Diane: So you were spoiled rotten?

Bob: No, I was very sick when I was four, seven and 10, four, 7, 10, and 13. I had rheumatic fever. And the first time I was in bed for 26 weeks. Oh my goodness. But when I was 13 the doctor decided to take my tonsils out and the tonsils were all embedded, so after that, never had it again.

Diane: So you had all those bouts of sickness because of you, your tonsils? Yeah. And after that for the rest of your life, have you been pretty healthy?

Bob: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I was in the service, was in the Navy. My wife was in the Navy.

Diane: Is that how, did you meet your wife in the Navy?

Bob: She was in the Navy. I had just gotten out and she was working for the Naval Intelligence in Portland. I was working at the post office. She would come to the post office to pick up the mail. So yeah, you know, for the Navy and that's how we met.

Diane: You started flirting. I think you are a little flirtatious.

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Bob: Not me.

Diane: Your childhood, would you consider it a happy childhood?

Bob: We grew up during the Depression, and it was, uh, it was different, so much different than they are today. The world is terrible today. Half the world's against the other half. I think half are intent on killing off the other half. It's not good. I don't like it.

Diane: It worries you?

Bob: It worries me for the grandkids, not for me.

Diane: Yeah, I feel the same way. When I look at the way things are going for the planet and for the human race. I think the same thing. I worry what's it going to be like for my grandchildren who are little toddlers now. When you were a child growing up in the depression did your family do without?

Bob: Well, we did without with a lot of things that kids have today. Yeah. I mean there was us boys. And we had one bicycle between us. And I used to wear clothing and shoes from the rich kids.

Diane: And hand me downs from your brothers. Yeah, yeah. When did you get your first job?

Bob: I was 16. What did you do? I worked in an automotive store. Myral's Automotive Store in Portland.

Diane: Is that still around? I feel like. No. Okay.

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Bob: I don't know if you remember where the old State Drugstore? Right across the street from the State Drug Store. Greyhound Bus was on the corner, and Myral's was right next to them.

Diane: I must have gone past it because when I was in high school we lived up near Pine Street. And so I'd have to walk down Congress Street to get to Portland High School. Yeah. I'm sure I passed it.

Bob: I went to Portland High for a while.

Diane: What year were you there?

Bob: Oh, well, let's see I quit my senior year and went into the service. What year would you have graduated? 42?

Diane: You would have graduated with my Aunt Jackie. So my mom graduated in 44. And her sister graduated in 42. You probably passed my mother and my aunt in the hallways of Portland High School. Yeah. Interesting. So you went into the Navy when you were a senior, you quit school, and you went into the Navy. Was that a decision that had to be made? Is it a decision that you regretted or? No.

Bob: No. In fact, I joined the Navy to make a career but after I spent a couple of years over in the South Pacific, and I developed stomach ulcers, and I wanted to stay in but they said no, you have to go and they kicked me out.

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Diane: Did you further your education when you were in the Navy or because you were in the Navy were you able to get a college, I mean a high school, degree after?

Bob: I went back to high school in 1972. And did my senior year, yeah.

Diane: That's a long time though. By then you are married, you had kids? Yup. And was your degree called the GED?

Bob: No, I got my diploma.

Diane: What made you decide to go back and get your high school diploma when you're a married man with kids in your 40s?

Bob: That year, in 1972, they started having Postmasters from within the mail service and I was a second one. I became the postmaster at Limerick.

Diane: And you needed a high school diploma in order? Yeah, yeah. Good for you. Were you working for the post office as a mail carrier or anything like that beforehand?

Bob: I clerked in the post office for five years, and I carried mail for five years. And then I went into the post office garage. I was there 15 years. And I was the mechanic in charge when I left there to go to be postmaster of Limerick. That was 1972.

Diane: That's pretty cool. You worked your way up. You saw that you could go further and the post office people saw that you could go further. That must have felt really, really good.

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Bob: It did.

Diane: In Limerick, so that means that you did you all move to Limerick or did you live in Portland or South Portland?

Bob: No, at the time we lived in South Portland and we sold that house and had a house built in East Waterboro.

Diane: So after all those years of doing other kinds of work in the post office, what did it feel like to suddenly be a postmaster, to be in charge of everything? Pretty good.

Diane: And how long were you their postmaster?

Bob: Six years.

Diane: And then what happened?

Bob: Then I had a couple of MIs so I retired.

Diane: Well, you weren't very old then were you?

Bob: No, I was in my 50s, 54, I think, 55, somewhere around there.

Diane: So by MI we're talking heart attack. You had a couple of heart attacks. Were you a large man then? No, never. Family history? No, no. What did they think caused your heart attacks?

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Bob: I don't know. Well, I guess what when I was born, I did have a bad valve in the heart from the rheumatic fever. Okay. So that probably stemmed from there.

Diane: You met your wife when you were working in the post office? Yup. Back in the 60s, I guess it would have been? 50s or 60s? Yeah. In the 40s? Okay. Oh, yeah, that's right. I'm thinking we graduated high school in the 60s. She was born in the 40s. Okay. You met your wife back in the 40s. You're working in the post office. She's in the Navy. You got married. How many kids did you have?

Bob: Four

Diane: And how long has your wife been gone?

Bob: 99

Diane: That must have been hard for you. Yeah. So you were married for how many years before she passed? 54 years. And what, what did she die of?

Bob: She, uh, she really never, she never did anything and I kind of blamed it on me because I married young. How young were you? I was 19.

Diane: That's what they did back then.

Bob: Yeah, yeah. But when we got married we had, you know the kids, but I hadn't spent any time as a young man. Right. But I made up for it and I believe, I honestly believe, that I probably helped her along.

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Diane: If you could go back in time and change anything? Oh, yes. Tell me what it would be.

Bob: Oh, that mostly, how I spent my time with her.

Diane: How would you change it?

Bob: Oh, I'd just include her in a lot more of my life than I did. I used to hunt, fish, play golf, while she was setting home doing nothing.

Diane: And this is while the kids were growing up Yeah, yeah. How would you rate yourself as a dad?

Bob: Not great. I don't think. I think because of the way that I grew up, I said if I ever have kids, they're not gonna put up with what I put up with, so, and I went too far.

Diane: What do you mean by that? Because so many people will say that I am not going to be like my dad was or my mother was. So what was different for you?

Bob: Well, we were more ... my folks, my folks, my father was a tyrant. He was a good man. He worked his butt off and he had to during the Depression. He worked probably 20 hours out of 24. And I think that set the pace a little bit.

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Diane: So you didn't want to be a tyrant? No, no. So what, are you saying then? I went the other way too far. You just let the kids do whatever they want to do and left your wife in charge?

Bob: More or less. In a lot of cases yes, yeah.

Diane: So once the kids all left the house and it was just you and your wife -- did that ever happen or did she pass away before all the kids left the house?

Bob: No, we were without kids for a while.

Diane: Did it get any better or was the pattern set?

Bob: She had a stroke herself and she was paralyzed, she couldn't talk, it was about 20 years.

Lee, Bob's daughter: She was just 58 when she had her stroke and Dad took care of her for the next 19 years.

Diane: Wow. So you took care of her for 19 years after she had a stroke. That takes a lot of love, patience, dedication. What motivated you to do that?

Bob: 26:46 Guilt probably.

Diane: Did you care for her in your home? Did she always live at home after she had the stroke? Who took care of you? Because when you're care

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giving somebody, somebody's got to take care of you too, or you're going to go off the deep end.

Bob: I went hunting fishing, played golf.

Diane: So while she had the stroke and she was home, you still continued to do ...

Bob: What I could, yes, yeah, yeah.

Diane: But then you still probably the responsibility of caring for her got more and more and more?

Bob: Well, at one point in time, oops, I'm sorry. That's okay. Some of the nurses they came to the house, they come there every so often and they finally come in one day you've got to get a nurse. So at that particular time she went into, what's the name of that place?

Lee: The Barron Center.

Bob: Yeah, the Barron Center.

Diane: So, on the advice of the nurses who were coming into the house, they said you can't do this anymore and so she went into a nursing home essentially. How long did she live there before she died? A couple of years?

Bob: She was there, do you remember? Two to three years.

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Bob: I used to out about every day.

Diane: So I think that you, excuse me, you probably learned some valuable lessons with that whole situation that might help somebody else. Because I think that when somebody gets sick and you love them you want to take care of them. And there's, I think there's guilt that must come into it because you feel like you're supposed to because they're your partner but it's so hard to take care of yourself. And so then you have more guilt that you're even thinking about wanting to get away. Was it like that, kind of like a vicious, you knew you needed to get away and then you felt guilty about it. Yes. What advice would you give to a man or a woman who's in that a similar situation? Maybe their spouse's or partner's had a stroke or has Alzheimer's or whatever?

Bob: Well, I think it would all depend on where they were at a time, you know, where he was at, or where she was at, what the conditions were is going to govern something like that.

Diane: Well, let's say like for you, it's getting more and more challenging.

Bob: Oh, yeah.

Diane: So this decision, what was it like for you to come to this decision? That, yes, she needs to move into a nursing home.

Bob: I agreed with it, because I was getting to a point where I, well, I can't tell you how I felt about it, but I knew it had to happen, the way I started to feel.

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Diane: Were you exhausted?

Bob: No, I don't think so.

Diane: How were you?

Bob: I was always doing something, like I volunteered for the, I belonged to the American Legion Post down in Old Orchard, going down there for 25 or 30 years and I worked down there. We ran a beano down there. I did that two days a week.

Diane: I would think that would be critical.

Bob: It was, it was. I kind of would hate to think if I didn't do that what it made have been like.

Diane: Sounds like an opportunity to recharge your batteries.

Bob: Yeah, yeah.

Diane: Give you all that mental and physical energy to go back and then take care of her. When she went into the nursing home, you continued to go and see her all the time and you continued to be able to do your own thing. And was that a big relief?

Bob: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Yes, it was.

Diane: I'm glad that you were able to say that. You know, because that's the thing that I think that some people don't want to acknowledge.

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Bob: Oh, yeah, I know what you mean. Yeah. I can see where it would happen.

Diane: All right. So you've now had a few decades of being kind of on your own. Yeah. I mean, you lived with the other lady and your love-hate relationship. What would be the perfect situation for you right now? When you sit and think about yeah, here's what I'd really like?

Bob: I guess it's what I said, companionship.

Diane: Tell me about all the things that you do, like what makes it a good day for you? What are some of the things you do on a good day?

Bob: Take the car and go shopping.

Diane: What'd you do this summer?

Bob: We have a garden out here. They gave us, I guess you can see them from here. I do see them now. Garden plots for, there were 36 out there, if you wanted to take one you could take one you know and plant.

Diane: What did you plant?

Bob: Oh tomatoes, cucumbers, corn.

Diane: Where do you get your energy? I don't know. You do have energy because you get up and you do things. Oh yeah. Well, what motivates you?

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Bob: I think just the fact if I can do the things I'm doing if I do keep going it helps me, you know physically.

Diane: So you make choices then because there are some people who might choose to not do anything nah, I don't want to. But that's not your mindset.

Bob: No, no. I went to the gym for 14 years.

Diane: Basics? Yeah. Are you still going?

Bob: Yep. I just started a couple of days ago, I went back and I have a couple pieces of equipment here that I use.

Diane: Oh, I saw those when I came in.

Diane: Tell me about exercising because we hear that at any age, we're supposed to be exercising. We should. And what does it do for you to exercise?

Bob: It just, it keeps my body, keeps me, keeps me going.

Diane: And have you had to change how you exercise over the last decade or so?

Bob: I haven't done as much and I can tell.

Diane: How can you tell?

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Bob: Because I slow down.

Diane: So if you don't exercise you slow down, but if you go back to it, it does improve you?

Bob: It does improve. Yeah. Yeah.

Diane: What does it improve exactly?

Bob: Physically?

Diane: I mean do you feel different somehow? What are some of the specific things that you notice about maybe your, your attitude? Yeah. All those different types of things.

Bob: The apartment, taking care of the apartment helps. You know, I can tell, the way I do things here. Now I had a couple of, up until September 1st, I think, I had a couple of women that came a couple times. Each one came once a week just to do things here.

Diane: Do a little housework for you?

Bob: Yeah, but now, I do it myself.

Diane: I think that's good because doesn't it improve your disposition, too?

Bob: Oh yeah. Oh absolutely. I get feeling quite low and I don't do these things because I have time to sit and think and feel sorry for myself.

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Diane: What do you mostly feel sorry for?

Bob: Get lonely, is the biggest thing.

Diane: Yeah. So when you exercise, when you get up and move, not only does it help you to be stronger and motivate you to do other things, it makes you feel better about yourself. Yes. Are other people who live here as active as you are physically? Do they go for walks with you? Things like that.

Bob: They go yeah, they go for walks. I have problems walking.

Diane: Oh, so you can still drive okay and you can get yourself like to the gym and then they have a program that you can do at the gym?

Bob: Yeah, yeah.

Diane: So that seems like it would be key. Why can't you walk as well as you used to?

Bob: Oh, I think it's just, I have COPD and I run out of breath quite quickly.

Diane: Do you have to do oxygen? No, not yet. What are other things that you enjoy doing? You did the gardening? You like to be with the people here? You have fun playing one woman off the other. Laugh. Yeah, what are all the things you enjoy doing?

Bob: Not much here. Watch TV, I use the computer.

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Diane: So maybe you need to think about moving to a different kind of a place. Have you ever thought about that, moving into a place that is a little more socially oriented?

Diane: I know there are places. Its affordability is an issue, of course, isn't it? But where they have all kinds of social activities going on all the time? Yeah. Is it like here, do you have to make it up yourself? Yes. Yeah. There's nobody who's like there's not an activities director.

Bob: Yeah, the only activity here is they play canasta.

Diane: Do you play canasta? No.

Diane: So do you still go to The Beano games? Do you still run those? Are you still active at all in any veterans groups?

Bob: Not right, no, not now. It's because of my driving at night. I can't drive at night. Daytime, I can I can see all right.

Diane: So that's, you decided that you can't drive at night. Nobody told you I mean the kids haven't been after you have they?

Bob: Oh, they, they, yes, they have.

Diane: Do your kids bug you about a lot of stuff?

Bob: No, no. Driving,

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Diane: Because they're afraid, you know, they don't want you to get hurt or to hurt somebody else. Yeah, true. What if Lee or one of the other kids came to you and said, Dad, we don't want you driving anymore? How would you handle that situation?

Bob: There are times now if I don't feel I should be driving, I don't drive. And that's the way I would handle it. As long as I have my senses about me and know enough to do that, I think I'd be all right. I conversed with my doctor about it and he's also saying, you're all right you can drive day, but I don't drive at night.

Diane: Or in bad weather?

Bob: Yeah, or with rain I don't, yeah, yeah.

Diane: How do you want people to treat you now that you're 94?

Bob: Like here, they don't treat me any different.

Diane: How do you see yourself?

Bob: I think, you know, I'm all right to do these things. I really don't have the incentive to do some of those things and there are some things that I can't do of course.

Diane: Is there anything that you miss?

Bob: Golf.

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Diane: You enjoyed golf.

Bob: Yeah, golfing, fishing,

Diane: Is there any kind of work that you still do or what you consider to be work?

Bob: Well, I change the furniture all around.

Diane: So you're an interior decorator?

Bob: Eh, yeah, right. Yeah, I do. I like to do that.

Diane: You talked about some of the things you, if you could, how you'd do them over but what are some of the things you're proudest of or that you enjoyed, have enjoyed the most?

Bob: Oh, I think the golfing. I did well. Outdoors.

Diane: You loved that the most? Yeah. What are you proud of? Some of the things that you've done in your life?

Bob: I'm proud of my kids and I'm proud of the service that I had and service that I give to the American Legion, and I also belong to the DAV and the VFW. I'm a life member of those.

Bob: DAV has a van that picks up other veterans and takes them to the hospital, waits for them and brings them home. I did that for about nine years.

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Diane: Tell me what DAV stands for.

Bob: Disabled Veterans.

Diane: And so you would take you would drive the van and you would take them, what, up to Togus or to appointments and things? You did that for a long time. About nine years, I think. That's pretty cool. That was good. That was good.

Diane: Like we were talking about before, you don't just sit idly by, you're a doer.

Bob: I try to be.

Diane: Do you have any advice that you would pass along to anybody? We're all aging.

Bob: The only really good advice I could get to would be to keep your body moving.

Diane: You've been listening to *Conversations About Aging*, a Catching Health Podcast. I'm Diane Atwood and I've been talking with Bob Newcomb, who is 94 years old and looking for companionship.

If you enjoyed my conversations with Bob, please consider sharing it with a friend. You'll find more episodes on my blog Catching Health at CatchingHealth.com.

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