Paper Mache for 11-6-26 by David Read

Growing up in Florida, we studied the early Spanish explorers, including Hernando de Soto and Juan Ponce de León. Of all the stories we heard, the one that stuck with me was the legend of Ponce de León and the Fountain of Youth, a spring said to restore the youth of anyone who drank from it. I've long suspected that an evening at the theater could also do me some good in terms of longevity. Now there's a study that gives me an excuse to bring it up at my next checkup. Maybe my doctor will write me a prescription for "more theater." Getting my insurance to cover the tickets may take another study.

In May, *The Guardian* reported on research from University College London linking arts and cultural engagement with slower biological aging. Researchers examined blood samples and survey responses from 3,556 adults in the United Kingdom. They used tests called epigenetic clocks, which look at chemical patterns on DNA to estimate biological age and how quickly a person is aging. People who took part in arts and cultural activities more often tended to show signs of slower aging. The activities ranged from singing and dancing to visiting museums and galleries.

Before we trade our gym memberships for season tickets and our vegetables for theater popcorn, keep in mind that the study found an association. Whether the arts themselves slowed aging remains an open question. What I like about the study is how many ways there are to take part. You can sing in a choir, sit in the audience, or finally sign up for that watercolor class. Somewhere along the way, many adults decide creativity belongs to somebody else. They can't draw. They can't sing. They have two left feet. Usually, these declarations are delivered with the finality of a medical diagnosis. I'd suggest getting a second opinion.

At Yuba Sutter Arts & Culture, we see what can happen when people give themselves permission to try something. In a ceramics class for veterans, it might start with asking the person next to you how they prepared their clay to do what they wanted. At a gallery reception, two strangers can get to talking because they've stopped in front of the same painting or photograph and noticed entirely different things. Those small exchanges are part of what can make people glad they chose to get out of the house and participate or attend.

A rehearsal, a gallery reception, or a class puts an appointment with possibility on the calendar. If your days have started to run together, it helps to have somewhere to be on Thursday. That's one reason I think about access when we plan programs across Yuba and Sutter counties. Can someone get there easily? Can they afford it? Will they feel at home walking in by themselves? Those questions matter when we talk about arts accessibility. Keeping a class or a performance affordable or a gallery open gives people a place to go, something to look forward to, and a chance to get to know their neighbors.

None of us can negotiate with the calendar. But we can decide what goes on it. See the play. Visit the exhibition. Pick up the paintbrush. Sing, even if your first audience is the dog. If those experiences help us age a little more slowly, wonderful. In the meantime, they give us something worth doing with the years we have. As Gandalf says in *The Lord of the Rings*, "All we have to decide is what to do with the time that we are given."