

Wisdom for my 22-year-old Self

By Fran Butterfoss, NU'72 GED'75



One of the benefits of living more than seven decades is that I can acknowledge that I have accumulated a fair amount of wisdom along the way. Most significantly, much knowledge comes from the bumps, twists and turns that I have encountered along the way. As a 22-year-old, I saw my future life as a straight path that was guided by a series of goals that I set for myself. Having grown up in a fairly dysfunctional family, goal setting was an effective tactic that helped me negotiate my early years and prepare for college. Even at Penn, I was a driven student with compulsive study habits. I worked harder than necessary and was always looking to the next step ahead. As long as I kept my eye on the prize (whatever it was), I felt good about myself and was successful. So, I planned to use this strategy for the rest of my life.

What I didn't realize then, and do now, is that life is all about change. These changes could be made by me or by others and the results were often not immediately obvious. For example, many academic or job opportunities were affected by decisions or changes that my husband or family situation dictated. I thought I would practice one profession throughout my life but, in the end, I had three different careers and moved 19 times! Over time, I learned to be resilient, to roll with constant change and actually enjoy it most of the time. I lived in many wonderful and a few not so wonderful places, met many people who influenced me in significant ways, and learned how to embrace change.

In looking back, I would tell my younger self to relax a little. Getting the highest grades or the next promotion are not as important as living a more worry-free, flexible life. For example, I aspired to hike the Appalachian Trail when I was a young woman of 23. The opportunity was there, but I found many excuses not to do it, such as finances and concerns that my career would be derailed. In the end, it would have worked out if I had adjusted my plans a little. I have counseled many young relatives, students and professionals not to be overly concerned if they aren't sure about what career or job to pursue. I urge them instead to listen to their head and heart and forge ahead in following their passion. The most fulfilled people I know have lived such a courageous life. Our journeys usually do not follow a straight path anyway and that is what makes life so very fascinating, right?