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Lillian Müller

"How I look this good at 57"

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The art of aging gratefully

Lillian Müller, former Playboy model turned motivational speaker, talks to Sarah Best about how her life changed when she went raw 30 years ago, why we should watch what we think even more closely than we watch what we eat, and why she's on a mission to challenge limiting beliefs about aging.

"In the year and a half that I've been doing lectures, sometimes I don't feel like showing up. It's the pressure of having to be at my best. To be honest with you, I didn't feel like doing this interview either..." confides Lillian Müller. "The old me would have procrastinated; found an excuse to postpone it. But what I tell myself now is that if I can reach one person with hope – if just one person who's down in the dumps finds something uplifting and starts eating healthily or going to the gym as a result – then it's been worth it."

In her lectures, Müller draws the crowds by sharing how she has managed to stay looking so young: 30 years on a high-raw diet coupled with regular exercise and regular detoxing (while, astonishingly, surgery, Botox and other artificial procedures have not figured in her programme). Now 57, she began her modelling career 40 years ago, after she won a beauty contest in her native Norway. Working in London several years later she was spotted by a scout from Hugh Hefner's Playboy empire. She was chosen as the magazine's "Playmate of the Year" in 1976, at the age of 25, and went on to become the most featured Playmate in history, appearing on the cover eight times. She caught Hefner's eye and the pair were an item for a time and remain close friends to this day.

But these days Müller is, she tells me, "breaking out of the mould of being a Playboy sex symbol. I'm using sex appeal for a higher purpose now. The stepping stone of my past creates curiosity and gets me in the door but I'm not about personal gratification as I was when I was younger. Those of us in the raw movement who are passionate about getting this message out are serving a power and energy much bigger than ourselves."

Müller discovered the raw diet and lifestyle when she sought the help of a holistic doctor at the age of 27. So what led to her decision to turn this into a career three decades later? It began, it turns out, with some serious soul-searching when she turned 50. "I thought to myself, 'I've been a sex symbol but what have I achieved? Have I really done anything worthwhile? Have I done something beyond me or has it just been an ego ride?' You have to ask those questions at a certain point."

And the verdict? "I had done something worthwhile through living for my daughter. But other than that, what had I done besides being lusted after? It was fun to be good-looking and popular; I'm not saying it wasn't. But even in my 20s, at the height of my career,

I never thought I was living life to the fullest. When you reach 50 you're half of 100! It's a wake-up call!"

Being with her grandmother when she passed away that same year provided another one. "When my grandmother died she was 91 and she told me her whole life felt like a dream; like it had gone by in a flash," recalls Müller. "At that point I thought, 'No more procrastination. Anything I want to do, I've got to do it now.' When I wake up, I thank God I'm alive. A lot of people died yesterday. A lot of people don't have the knowledge we have. There is a saying, 'Blossom wherever you're planted.' *Blossom, goddammit!* We have to seize the day and seize the opportunities it brings."

Listening to Müller talk, it is clear she has read and studied extensively from personal development literature, and the inspirational quotes come thick and fast. "As Wayne Dyer wrote, 'Don't die with the music still in you,'" she says at one point, adding, "My worst nightmare is to die with the music still in me." Best-selling author and speaker Dyer is mentioned several times during the course of the interview and is clearly a hero. "He's the kind of man I'd like to marry and have 10 children with!" she jokes. Müller has never married, "but I haven't given up on the dream I'll get married one day." She has a daughter – 18-year-old Alice Angelica – and she has been in a relationship for several years with the photographer Maurice Rinaldi, with whom she lives in Los Angeles.

To hear Müller speak – and given that she has moved in Hollywood circles for so long – you would think it a safe bet that she's done considerable time on the therapist's couch. Not the case, she tells me: she has actually never been in therapy. "I am my own psychologist," she declares. "I lift *myself* up. You can't rely on the world to give you compliments. Give yourself compliments. When I am low I fire myself up again. Like everyone else, I go through periods when I'm down, I have doubts, I have fear, and I think 'What's the point?' But I seem always to get myself back on track."

If Müller is passionate about nutrition and exercise, she is even more passionate about the importance of a positive mindset. "I've come to the conclusion that the mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of looking after ourselves are even more important than the physical," she says. "But if you look after *all* of those areas there's no limit to what you can do. It's easy to focus on the physical so much you forget the spiritual. But your spirituality affects your



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career, your partner, the way you raise your kids... All this is much more important than having a flat stomach.”

“Starting to work on myself so young saved my butt,” she adds. “I’ve met 23-year-old models who are doing Botox – not because they have wrinkles, but because they think it will prevent them. I see women my age having it and they have faces like masks. I like to have some character in my face. And I’m an actress, so I have to be able to make expressions. If I had just been interested in my appearance I’d have had a face lift by now. There’s nothing sadder than an aging bimbo. I vowed I would never be that. But there’s also nothing wrong with having a sexy look. You can still be a conscious, evolved person.”

Born in Grimstad, Norway, in August 1951, Müller’s earliest memories are of life with her mother, stepfather and three siblings in an old farmhouse with a single bedroom and no bathroom. “We lived from hand to mouth,” she remembers. “Now Scandinavia is very socialist but at that time in Norway there was no help from the state.” At the age of 11, her mother had to take a job at sea in order to make ends meet and Müller and her siblings were bundled off to an orphanage where they spent the next five years. “I was very hurt, very angry and very insecure,” she recalls. “When kids are put in those places it either breaks them or makes them.”

In Müller’s case it was the latter. Determined to make a better life for herself she studied hard and became a straight-A student. “I buried my head in books. No one looked at me and none of the boys asked me out. That didn’t change until I was 17 and it’s one of the reasons I did so well at school!” But when Müller turned 18, her mother noticed her daughter’s late blossoming and entered her in the ‘Miss Norway’ contest. She finished as runner-up in that and then achieved the same position in a ‘Miss Beauty International’ contest.

Her modelling career took off and she was soon flying all over the world for catalogue shoots and fashion shows, but at this time she had no knowledge of nutrition. “God gave me good genes,” she says. “I was born naturally good-looking. I didn’t have to work at it so I didn’t realize I had to look after it. I didn’t know anything about calories or fat grams.” In 1975, aged 24, she was in Chicago on her first Playboy shoot. “I remember being on that shoot and eating foot-long submarine sandwiches during breaks. They had to tell me to stop eating. I ate and ate, out of nervousness and compulsiveness”

Given that nervousness and compulsiveness, it is fortunate that Müller grew up with an unshakeable aversion to drink and drugs. She is quite possibly the only person to have spent three decades as a model and actress and never touched either. “There were people in my family who drank too much and I was smart enough that something in me warned me,” she explains. “I can’t imagine waking up not knowing what I said or did last night. That’s scary. I guess I am a control freak!”

But food was another matter. Soon after her arrival in the US she had acquired a new boyfriend (Hugh Hefner), a new home (the Playboy Mansion) and a new diet. “There was a walk-in refrigerator full of food like I’d never seen before,” she remembers. “Boiled eggs in trays, crab legs, buckets of peeled shrimp, whole grilled chickens, salmon, filet mignon... I used to pull up a chair and eat. Then I’d move onto desserts: German chocolate cake, apple pie, strawberry shortcake, cookies and ice cream... Imagine going from my background to *that*. If you have nervous problems and compulsive tendencies, imagine how much food you can eat.”

It was at this time that her health began to deteriorate. Her list of ailments grew and grew, eventually including anaemia, low blood sugar, fainting spells, and swelling in her joints, as well as anxiety and depression. She was on a downward spiral with no clue how to reverse it. But the answer was soon to come to her.

At the age of 27, Müller was training to lose her Norwegian accent with a top Hollywood dialect coach. She had already appeared in a number of TV shows and movies at the time and was taking acting classes, but the accent was limiting the roles she could be considered for. One day the coach, concerned about her student's depression, anxiety and poor concentration, informed her, "I can't teach you anymore. You need help." She packed her off to holistic doctor Gene Stanlee and it was a meeting that was to change the course of Müller's life.

Stanlee was fitness trainer and health advisor to some of Hollywood's top stars and called himself "the world's foremost authority on age reversal through blood purification." He informed her she had to detox, and put her on a strict fruitarian diet. Over the next year, he taught her exercise, meditation, yoga and a wealth of information about how to feel better in both body and mind. And for nine whole months she consumed only fresh fruits and their juices – a far cry from the diet she was on when she consulted Stanlee, and from her childhood one of "meat, milk, grains, eggs and chocolate". She had regular colonic hydrotherapy sessions to support the detox and on this virtuous regime she said goodbye to her health problems one by one. For good. "I haven't taken a pill or any medication in 30 years," she says.

But despite this success, Müller does not want to give the impression that this is an easy path. While getting to grips with her new lifestyle under Stanlee's tutelage, she took a year off work so she could devote all her time to the study and practice of holistic health. But the programme became much more challenging to follow when she returned to work and had to combine it with a busy schedule. "I stopped eating all raw and followed a vegetarian diet instead – one that included chicken and fish!" she recalls. "It took me 10 years – from the age of 27 to 37 – until I let go of chicken."

Like many who have "gone raw", Müller found to her dismay that an in-depth understanding of what dead foods do to the body was not enough to stop her bingeing on them. "I didn't throw up and I was never anorexic, but I loved food and I was compulsive about it," she says. "I would get weak and crazy, feel rejected and think, 'Everything else in my life may be shit today but I'm going to eat grilled chicken.' No matter how many times I read about factory farming I still had that craving. For me now factory farming is a big issue. I don't eat chicken anymore, but if I was going to eat chicken I would never eat commercially farmed chicken. It's horrifying what they do and the compassion I have goes way beyond any desire I could have for that meat."

But she struggled with cravings for years, and it wasn't just grilled chicken that was calling out to her; she cites example after example: her early cycle of staying raw for several weeks then devouring a whole loaf of bread in one sitting; the Christmas she spent at home in Norway when she ate nothing but chocolate for three days – a whole pound a day; going through her daughter's trick-or-treat bag at Halloween and eating 30 Hershey's Kisses. "Now, because I've been doing this so long, my desire for foods like that has gone. But it's taken 30 years of reading and learning and living it to get to the point I am today. We all have to find a system that works for us and it's different for each of us."

These days Müller follows a high-raw diet and cravings for junk foods are a thing of the past. She feels at her best when she eats all raw, something she finds easy "in the spring and summer and into the fall, but some days in winter, even in LA, my body doesn't want to be on just raw". So she sticks to fruit and herbal teas during the day, and dinner will be, "a vegan stew or a couple of baked potatoes or baked yams, but always with a salad."

She is adamant that flexibility and self-forgiveness have been essential to her success. "No matter what I try, I fall off my path.

"The minute you detox you are lifted physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually."

In the beginning I fell off it all the time. The main thing is to keep trying. Just keep getting back on the path. In the end it becomes effortless. So if you find yourself eating Hershey's Kisses, just enjoy it and then forget about it, eat lightly the next day, go to the gym, and your body will be back to how it was in a few days. You're not going to age or lose your health because of occasional transgressions."

"A lot of people think I'm so-called "perfect" because they think I do this all the time," she adds. "My job is to be honest about what I do, how I look this good at this age without surgery, how I fall off the path and how I get myself back up. In my experience, many of the people in the raw vegan movement who say they are raw vegan all the time are not. We eat for psychological reasons as well as for physical ones. That said, of course a raw, vegan, organic diet is the ultimate. It all boils down to being super healthy and super sexy and helping save the planet and the animals. It's win win win. So absolutely go for raw food as much as you can."

What advice does she have for those who are new to the concept of the raw diet and keen to experiment? "As long as you're alive you can become well. If you're not healthy, *become* healthy! The minute you detox you are lifted physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. In three months of detox you can accomplish a lot, and in seven years your body is all new. So why not start being super healthy today? You'll be inspired by the results and you'll get great compliments."

This has certainly been true in Müller's case. "Sexy, young guys think I'm 40!" she laughs. "I tell them I'm 57 and watch the shock on their faces because they thought 57 meant really old. I love to say it! They didn't have any idea that 57 could be young, vibrant and sexy." Last summer, a Norwegian magazine approached with a proposal: would she and her daughter like to pose together in bathing suits for a feature? Müller, who usually hits the gym on a daily basis, had at that point not been able to go for over three months due to an injury. So did she decline the magazine offer? No – she donned her bathing suit for the cameras and, "despite not having worked out for all that time I held my own next to my 17-year-old daughter," she comments with a chuckle.

She has Gene Stanlee to thank for introducing her to the diet and lifestyle that keep her in such great shape and looking years younger than her age. But he was also instrumental in helping her achieve something she considers much more valuable than that: a healthy mindset about aging. Although the 57-year-old Lillian is excited about getting older and wiser, the 27-year-old Lillian was decidedly not. "When I was young, my whole life was based on my physical appearance," she recalls. "I had this huge anxiety about turning 30. I thought, '30? That's over the hill.' When your power is invested in being good-looking you get so afraid of aging. Dr Stanlee helped me to see that getting older didn't mean the end."

In his younger years, Stanlee was a famous wrestler and something of a pin-up himself, so he had also had to make peace with the aging process. "After one year studying with him and his wife I had no fear of 30 or 40 or 50," she says. "Only my perspective changed. Your sex appeal is about your energy; your



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pizzazz - not about whether you have wrinkles. What is attractive is fun and liveliness. I am not attracted to men who are only interested in young girls. When I see girls in their 20s who are afraid, like I was, of getting older, I think, ‘You’re afraid of being 30? Just wait until you’re 40!’ Women don’t come into their fullest package until their 50s! When you lose your insecurities – *that’s* when you become sexy.

“Aging should be a positive experience. We have to watch we don’t get pulled into the conventional, hypnotic, negative thinking. Whoever came up with that? You can go back to college when you’re 95! Society should look up to elders with their wisdom, knowledge and experience. There are old people rotting away in homes, with no one visiting them, taking a cocktail of medications three times a day. We’d better watch it because we’ll be there one day. So why don’t we change things before then by helping people in nursing homes today?”

She is in full flow now: “The day it stops is the day we stop having dreams and goals. I still say ‘When I grow up...’ I still want an Oscar. People tell me I’m crazy, but Jessica Tandy got an Oscar at 81. That was many years ago so that’s equivalent to 91 today! There is no reason we should stop dreaming, planning or having goals. There will always be people who’ll tell you you “can’t do it”: that you’re too old, too fat, not educated enough... Just smile and say, ‘In spite of what you say, I’m doing it.’ I want to be the Oprah of health, fitness and rejuvenation. We should set ourselves *huge* goals – goals that may be out of reach. That’s what I did in the orphanage. Shoot for the stars and you might land on the moon. Shoot for the treetops and where will you land?”

So at 57, is it safe to say that she’s confident the best is still to come? “When I turned 30 I felt great about it, when I turned 40 I felt even better, when I turned 50 I celebrated. And 60? That’s a few years away and I can’t wait to dream up wild, crazy things to do to celebrate that. In 57 years I’ve never been drunk or high, so I’ve had a lot of time to think! I want to do things I haven’t done before. What can I achieve, what influence can I have in society? When you’re older, you’re more experienced, you have more wisdom, you’ve met more people and read more books. Shake it up! Make a difference. Have a few wrinkles and love them!”

At the time of the interview Müller is about to travel back to Norway, where she is a household name, to continue shooting a reality TV series about her life. “Every show will have tips about being a healthy, vibrant woman and every show will be uplifting,” she explains. “This is a whole new beginning. I feel like a kid. Every day is a new adventure. I love thinking out of the box, pushing the limits, doing new things. When I was younger, everything I did was so fear-oriented. Now I try to serve my purpose in being one of those people who confronts fear and speaks about my experience with it. I have had a lot of fear in my life and a lot of periods in my life when fear stopped me. Few people have enough confidence, especially women. Your own self-doubts and fear are your own biggest enemy. Cancer, heart disease and diabetes are not the worst diseases on the planet. Fear is.”

Her advice? “We’re bombarded with so much negativity; there’s so much craziness in this world. But there are so many things we *can* do we have to stop thinking about what we can’t do. Circumstances will never lie ahead of you perfectly, so don’t wait for that. Just go out and serve your purpose. Don’t wait until tomorrow – do it today. Tell someone you love them. Start getting healthy. Do it now! Tomorrow you’ll find another excuse so you might as well grab yourself by the neck and just do it.”

Which is exactly what Müller confessed to me she had to do to override her earlier urge to postpone this interview. It is hard to believe, especially as by the time she tells me this it has lasted an animated four hours. And it is impossible to listen to her and not get inspired. “I inspire myself in the process of inspiring you,” she responds when I tell her this. “We all inspire each other. Do you think I could have got where I am today if I hadn’t met a lot of inspiring people in my life? I love people who think out of the box. I’ve been so inspired by older people who are different. I surround myself with them. I have so much respect for elders. When I’m 85, I want to be inspiring younger people.

“There is a lot of truth to the saying that youth is wasted on the young. You have no idea what you have at 18 nor even at 38. But you can be more valuable at 100 than at 30 if you play your cards right. Who knows where you can be then? So what are we doing complaining when we hit 50 or 60? We have so much more to offer to the world and also to romantic partners – especially if we start looking after our bodies when we are younger, but it’s never too late to start. I believe in our lifetime we are reincarnated many times. I had that life, now I have this life and in a couple of decades I might have another life. I see myself as a work-in-progress. I’m not finished. I haven’t even started scratching the surface!” ■

For more information see lillianmuller.com.

All photographs of Lillian are by Maurice Rinaldi (mauricerinaldiphoto.com)