

Aging

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General Observations

Anyone who knows an old person whom they only see every few years, knows what aging really is: it is the process, while alive, of slowly turning into a corpse.

“...it seems to me that in old age our souls are subject to more troublesome ailments and weaknesses than in youth. I said this when I was young, and they scoffed at me for my beardless chin. I repeat it now that my grey hairs give me authority. We call the queasiness of our tastes and our dislike of present-day things by the name of wisdom. But the truth is that we do not so much give up our vices as change them, and in my opinion for the worse. Besides a foolish and tottering pride, a tedious garrulity, prickly and unsociable moods, superstition, and an absurd preoccupation with money after we have lost the use of it, I find in old age an increase of envy, injustice, and malice. It stamps more wrinkles on our minds than on our faces; and seldom, or very rarely, does one find souls that do not acquire, as they age, a sour and musty smell. Man moves onward as a whole towards his growth and towards his decay.” — Montaigne, “On Repentance”.

“Were there any hopes to out-live vice, or a point to be super-annuated from sin, it were worthy [of] our knees to implore the dayes of Methuselah. But age doth not rectifie, but incurvate our natures, turning bad dispositions into worsen habits, and (like diseases) brings on incurable vices; for every day as we grow weaker in age, we grow stronger in sinne, and the number of our dayes doth but make our sinnes innumerable. The same vice committed at sixteene, is not the same, though it agree in all other circumstances, at forty; but swels and doubles from the circumstance of our ages, wherein besides the constant and inexcusable habit of transgressing, the maturing of our Judgement cuts off pretence unto excuse or pardon: every sin, the oftner it is committed, the more it acquireth in the quality of evill; as it succeeds in time, so it proceeds in degrees of badnesse; for as they proceed they ever multiply, and like figures in Arithmeticke, the last stands for more than all that went before it;...” — Browne, Sir Thomas, *Religio Medici*, in *Sir Thomas Browne: Selected Writings*, ed. Sir Geoffrey Keynes, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Ill., 1970, pp. 48-49.

When I was young, I felt confident that, when I became old, I would have brilliant new insights into the reason why old people act so peculiarly.

Now that I am old, I know that I was wrong. Some of the same attitudes, at least, if not the actual behaviors (so far) which I always despised in old people, are beginning to take hold in me as well: years of excruciating boredom on the job have made me bitter toward those among the young who do not seem to be willing (or compelled!) to endure the same boredom, year in and year out. Despite the steady growth in the percentage of old people in the population, I still sense the beginning of feeling like an outsider which is so characteristic among old people I have known. The importance of protecting what I possess seems to grow with each year, because I know there is less and less chance each year of regaining what I might lose. I have become like Mr. MacGregor, jealously guarding my garden against intruders. I watch my pennies even more than I used to, except when it comes to treating friends in restaurants and coffee shops — every penny spent in that way (I want to believe) being an investment against loneliness, now and in the future.

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To keep a job when you're old requires recognizing that you are regarded as probably incompetent by employers and fellow workers. I had more criticisms of my work in the last five years before I retired than I had in the previous twenty-five, and in those previous years I used to ask bosses to judge me harshly because I wanted to become as good as I could in my profession. The worst is to seem a person of fixed opinions, which, of course, becomes more and more difficult to avoid when you know that, as in your youth, you are years ahead of your bosses and fellow workers in knowing how the job should be done.

The rules for getting along with the young are simple: (1) never criticize — in particular, never criticize their music, even though, with each year, it seems to become more and more shallow and irrelevant (it *is* irrelevant to one in your stage of life); (2) maintain a good sense of humor; (3) maintain a healthy interest in their lives; and, most important, (4) never whine and complain. In particular this means, never initiate talk about the fact of being old; but if the subject comes up, talk about yourself in an amusing, self-mocking way, e.g., “Well, of course, speaking as one in the late afternoon of life...” (“No, no, you're still young!”).

It is perfectly all right to let young women know you are still attracted to them, but you become grotesque when you attempt to go farther than that unless you are very good looking and/or very rich.

“The blossoms snow down in my hair;
The trees and I will soon be bare.

The trees have more than I to spare.
The sleek, expensive girls I teach,
Younger and pinker every year,
Bloom gradually out of reach.
The pear tree lets its petals drop
Like dandruff on a tabletop.

The girls have grown so young by now
I have to nudge myself to stare.
This year they smile and mind me how
My teeth are falling with my hair...”

— W. D. Snodgrass, “April Inventory”

There is no way (in our time) to prevent ourselves from growing old, but there are ways of slowing down the process, namely, through diet and exercise.

A common characteristic of the old is bent knees and bent back. But as long as there is nothing wrong with your knees or back, walk erect and stand with legs straight (whenever you can remember it)!

Additional Thoughts

There is only one thing worse than being young and poor, and that is being old and poor.

The real source of misery for most of the aged in our time is not poverty or illness or loneliness or the prospect of imminent death but the message they receive every day from all sides: “*You are worthless!*” Only one thing is worse, and that is the *invisibility* the aged acquire, the not being looked at even for a fleeting second, not even by members of the opposite sex (or the same, if that is the preference) of one’s own age, and certainly not by the young. This is death in life, and for those who wonder, What will the world be like when I am gone, this is the answer.

No amount of suffering is too great for the creature who aspires and yet grows old.

“*TV Guide*: What do you have left to do?

Mr. Rogers: To die as well as I possibly can. And to be of some kind of an added blessing to somebody, even the worst somebody.” — *TV Guide*, Mar. 7-13, 1992, p. 25.

We must ask: *why are we so inept at growing old and dying?* Why are we so unprepared? Why is it that, no matter where we witness an old person’s final years and months and days, on TV or in books or movies, we see a person who has never spent any time thinking how he or she might make the end less terrible? It is always as if the person were the first human to face the end of life. And, of course, I am speaking here of far more preparation than storing an ample supply of pills or a loaded gun and making out one’s will. I am speaking of planning how one will have companionship through the final years and months and days, yes, even bought companionship; of finding out sooner, rather than later, what daily visiting services are available, and the costs (at the least, a service that will call each day to confirm that one is still alive); of leaving careful instructions for one’s heir or whomever is charged with completing the labor of closing down one’s physical presence in the world, regarding disposal of cherished possessions. Contrary to the Party line of America’s hope pushers, old age should be a time of preparing for death.

Youth and age: euthanasia!

