

CHAPTER 26

AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

I AGE, THEREFORE I AM
BY MOSES ZNAIMER

HAVING SO FAR SPENT 25 chapters in this Zoomer Philosophy dealing mostly with the physical and social challenges of aging, I decided, in thinking about Chapter 26, that I would try again to write about the good things that happen to us as we get older. I myself am about to enter my eighth decade¹ and, touch wood, feel not much different and perform not much differently than I did 10 or even 20 years ago, except that I *know* that I am that much closer to some kind of end and, likely, some difficulty and pain en route to it. Mostly, I'm conscious of all the people around me moaning and/or joking about it, so I thought I'd try to make them feel better and began by typing into Google: "What things improve with age?" The first answer that came up was: "cheese." Going down the page, I also came across: violins, guitars, really good boots, meerschaum pipes, Chinese *zisah* teapots, cast iron skillets, most of the plant life in your garden and red wine. To that list, and on the basis of nothing more than my own experience, I added taste and smell (hated caviar and blue cheese when I was in my teens, 20s, 30s, though I appreciate them now, very occasionally, as novelties, when I'm offered them at fancy parties). And, of course, only the best things are cherished and preserved long enough to become antiques.

But it was only toward the bottom of

¹Don't be shocked – the eighth decade means I'm turning 70!

that search that I found what I thought I was looking for, in the sense of things that improve in our own lives as we grow older. They included wisdom, life stories, body image, grandkids, the love and appreciation of others, Fido and Fluffy; and to which I would add perspective, a sense of the cycle in things, a sense of mastery of one's profession or art, even serenity. Great stuff, but is it sufficient to counter what the great poet and my teacher Irving Layton once called "the inescapable lousiness of growing old"?

One promising place to look, I thought, was back on the Zoomer Philosophy chapters wherein I had chronicled the dramatically improved modern prospects for our aging senses. These chapters were filled with examples of advances in technology and medicine that can now successfully slow the effects of time on what we can see and hear, even how fast we can run or swim. But as encouraging as these breakthroughs were, I realized, they were aimed at minimizing decline, not reversing it.

WELL, ALL RIGHT, I thought, I'll just have to find new evidence: the Nobel Prize phenomenon, for example. It turns out that since 1901, when the first prizes were given out, the average age of winners has risen steadily. In the first decade of the 20th century, for instance, the average physics winner was just over 52 years old; by the first decade of the 21st century, the average physics winner was just under 68, a jump of nearly 16 years. Eureka, we get smarter as we get older! But not so fast. In 1965, the flamboyant scientist-cum-bongo drummer, Richard Feynman, a physics winner that year at age 47, had indirectly predicted that with so many of the great discoveries already made, the

age of science winners was bound to rise because the number of fundamental laws of nature left to discover was shrinking and the Nobel committee would have to look farther and harder to find "big" achievements.

WITH HARD SCIENCE a question mark as an improvement candidate, I turned to social science. Contrary to the stereotype, studies show that people do not get crankier as they get older but *less* cranky. A paper published just this year in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*² found that people tend to become "kinder, more conscientious and agreeable with age." Also, people as they age tend to become more interested in the same easy-going characteristics in a mate. Again, contrary to accepted wisdom, studies show that people don't get more narrow-minded as they get older but, in fact, go in the opposite direction: they show more tolerance of new ideas and more liberal tendencies in their politics. This has always made perfect sense to me: older people are far less likely to "sweat the small stuff" than youth – and what else is wisdom but precisely this ability?

That painters and singers and writers can continue to produce masterpieces into their 70s and 80s and even beyond is well-documented. Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote his most serene masterpiece, "Crossing the Bar," a poem that's fatalistic and weightless at the same time, when he was 80; William Wordsworth composed the similar "How Beautiful the Queen of Night" when he was 76. Francisco José Goya's arguably most touching, forgiving work, *Self-Portrait with Dr. Arrieta*

²Claudia Brumbaugh et al, *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2012; 0(2012)

(the medical man who had saved his life), was painted when he was 74. Our own poet-songster superstar Leonard Cohen, who turns 78 this September and recently won the \$50,000 Glenn Gould Prize, released his latest and possibly finest album, *Old Ideas*, just this past year.

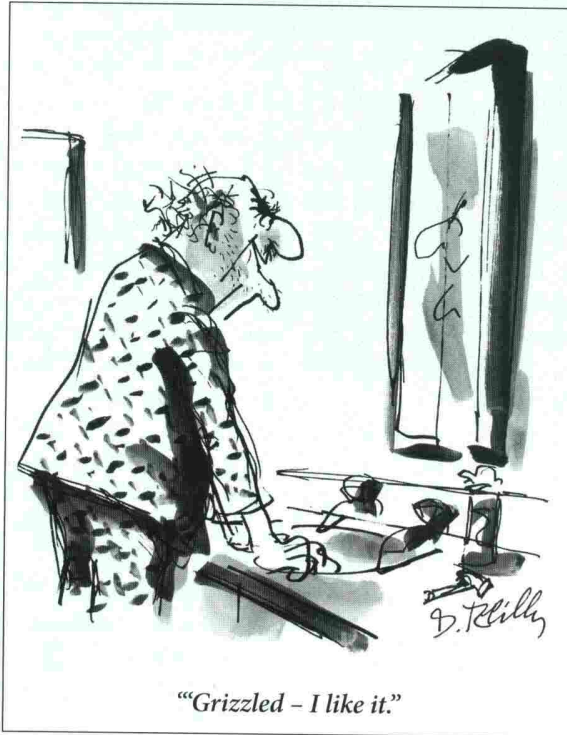
ADD TO THIS evidence a theory of mine that it takes a certain time span as an artist of any sort, popular or "fine," to achieve iconic status. Now that we actually inhabit Andy Warhol's future, where everyone is famous for 15 minutes, and the life cycle of celebrity can be as short as the news cycle, the chance for a new performer or creator to become an institution or for one of his or her creations to become a classic is greatly reduced. Not only, as per Malcolm Gladwell, does it take 10,000 hours to gain mastery of a skill, but it may take about the same amount of time to gain enduring presence and deep fame. We see Meryl Streep continuing to win awards and the Rolling Stones continuing to tour. When it comes to fostering greatness, our gang may still have an edge.

Still trolling for possibilities, I came across another study called "Words of Wisdom: Language Use Over the Life Span."³ The article described a study that examined how, with advancing age, language usage changed in 3,000 "ordinary people" and in the works of 10 eminent writers who had lived over the last 500 years. The study discovered that as they get older, both writers and non-writers "use more positive and fewer negative affect words, use fewer self-references [less first person], use more future-tense and fewer past-tense verbs and demonstrate

³ Pennebaker, James W.; Stone, Lori D. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol 85(2), Aug 2003, 291-301.

a general pattern of increasing cognitive complexity."

What is so arresting about the finding isn't just that it overturns a common stereotype of older people, specifically that we live in the past and are increasingly gloomy, it's that this characterization of us as future-oriented and optimistic and less self-involved doesn't mean we are *better* than our younger selves so much as *different* and uniquely impressive. And it struck me that in searching for some consolation in getting old, maybe we



"Grizzled - I like it."

shouldn't be scrambling to prove we can still compete with the younger set; we should be celebrating the new beings we're in the process of becoming.

The more I think about this distinction, the more sense it makes. What does it mean to really improve with age, after all, if not *to change*? And what are we doing when we continually obsess about our ability to perform relative to youth, if not trying, sometimes sadly, to be young (see my recent chapter on cosmetic surgery).⁴ Clinging to the same old way of keeping score in life is like treading water

⁴ Chapter 24, May 2012

because it's the only stroke you know. In the end, it's a mug's game, about as successful as a 60-year-old trying to dress like a 16-year-old. More than any stage of life, more even than infancy or adolescence, old age is a universe unto itself. And we, its citizens, are a species unto ourselves. "Old age is no place for sissies," Bette Davis once said, and she wasn't wrong. But one thing we can do to make our stay more pleasant is to adopt a value system that's more forgiving of the new species we've become.

A FASCINATING memory study done by Becca Levy, a professor of epidemiology and psychology at Yale,⁵ showed that older subjects, perhaps conditioned by our age-negative culture, are so suggestible to doubting their own cognitive abilities that subliminally flashing age-negative words like "senile" on a computer screen is enough to dramatically reduce their scores on every memory test they subsequently take. In other words, as much as we might have become more easy-going with others in our mature years, there's one group we're not so easy on, and that's ourselves; and it seems to me we need to give ourselves a break and start to see ourselves

not as more or less but as equal and admirable in ourselves.

What I haven't yet mentioned in all this, of course, is that perhaps the most important thing of all that's been getting better is lifespan itself. On average, we are today living 34 years longer than my great-grandparents' generation. Sooner or later, the law of entropy will prevail, but with the one exception of the Human Spirit. That means that the task of these golden Zoomer years is to finish finishing ourselves. ■

⁵ B.R. Levy, 1006, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71, 1092-1107