A Touch of Gray: Thoughts on Aging

by Jeff Plude (September 2022)

The Voyage of Life: Old Age, Thomas Cole, 1842

My wife and I were out having dinner to celebrate our anniversary. We had a reservation but the restaurant was crowded and I had to cajole the host to give us a better table (he tried to seat us right behind his station). We thanked him for accommodating us, and my wife told him why we were there. He asked us how long we'd been married. When she said thirty-four years, he looked at us and said, "You must be happy. You look young." We took it as a double-barreled compliment.

I say this because our modern culture, of course, is a

youthocracy. But the prejudice against old age isn't exactly a new phenomenon.

Old age's drawbacks, if so slight a word can be used, sometimes seem insufferable. I think of the scene in *It's a Wonderful Life* where George Bailey is regaling his soon-to-be wife with all the great things he's going to do, even "lasso" the moon for her. At which point a paunchy bald geezer who is eavesdropping from a rocker on his porch while reading the paper and puffing on a pipe springs to his feet: "Why don't you kiss her instead of talking her to death? . . . Ohh, youth is wasted on the wrong people!"

But perhaps old age is equally wasted on the wrong people. Or so it sometimes seems.

Around the same time as our anniversary dinner my wife and I were in church after the service and I was chatting with a guy who had given a presentation with his wife on their missionary work in Tajikistan. The way Christians sometimes do, he asked me how I came to be a believer. So I told him the short version, and among other details I said it was thirteen years ago, when I was forty-eight. He looked at me like the restaurant host had, he was slight and nearly bald with a trimmed beard, and said, "I thought you were my age." He was forty-seven. His comment was doubly satisfying, I suppose, since he's a doctor, though his specialty is ophthalmology.

In fact my eyes are an anomaly. I've been nearsighted since I started to work on computers four decades ago when I became a newspaper reporter (I'd been deputed to take photos to go with a feature story I was writing, and the managing editor—he'd already gone totally gray at thirty-seven and looked ten years older—griped that the prints were blurry and that I needed glasses). But to make up for my myopia I can still read microscopic print without reading glasses! People generally start wearing such aids from their mid-forties to fifty. When my wife and I go out for dinner, we're like living bifocals.

She's a painter and can read small print from a considerable distance with her naked eye. So I read the menus aloud when she doesn't feel like digging out her reading glasses, and at one place we regularly go to there's a chalkboard on the wall and she reads it to me from our table, since I have to take off my glasses in order to read the print on the menu.

The truth is that I haven't thought much about getting older. I've always had a kind of youthful look, and being short and fit may have added to it. I asked my wife the other day how much of my hair was gray—it has receded a little but is still pretty full—and she said about 5 percent. I seemed to have inherited this trait from my father, whose hair was jet black with maybe a gray hair or two when he died of a massive heart attack at fifty-six.

In fact there's no correlation between the age at which somebody's hair turns gray or white and how long they live, according to Dr. Benjamin Rush, the Revolutionary War doctor and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. He conducted what must be the first professional study in the country (if not the world) on aging. He analyzed data on people who were over eighty years and presumably his patients and summarizes his findings in his essay "An Account of the State of the Body and Mind in Old Age." It's entertaining and enlightening in places. Though Rush was a better writer and politician, perhaps, than he was a healer—he advocated bloodletting long after most doctors of the era had rejected it.

Rush tells the medical history, among others, of John Strangeways Hutton, who lived to be 109! (born in 1684, died in 1793). The doctor reports that Hutton was slight and had never "puked" in his life, which Rush said was even "more remarkable" because the patient had spent several years at sea as a young man. This led Rush to conclude that the stomach is an important indicator of overall health and longevity. Today of course it's known as "gut health" and is a popular theory. Hutton usually drank water, beer, or cider, and was drunk only

twice in his life, as “a boy.” And he rarely drank anything at all between meals, which contradicts the often-touted admonition that people should drink plenty of water, especially when older.

But I don’t think it’s a bad stomach that people most fear in old age: it’s weak legs and a gutted mind. Both can land you in a nursing home, which is a true modern horror in my experience; my mother lasted five years in one, till she died at eighty-six. Her mind was pretty good when she entered, but she was given what amounts to a chemical lobotomy (against my protests) by the ghouls who make their living off running these contemporary catacombs of the half-alive half-dead.

I wrote a feature story nearly thirty years ago on Alzheimer’s disease, and a statistic I used at the time claimed that half of those who are eighty or older suffer from dementia. Cicero couldn’t have disagreed more. In his essay “On Old Age” his mouthpiece, Cato the Elder, who is eighty-four, quips: “Nor, in point of fact, have I ever heard of any old man forgetting where he had hidden his money.”

It’s a witty and sardonic line if taken in one sense (that is, that old men are miserly), but the reality is much grimmer.

For my feature story I visited a couple’s house who were only in their mid-fifties and the husband was like a child. His wife had to do everything for him, though he was in excellent health otherwise. I stood outside the closed bathroom door and listened as she gave him a shower. She had to tell him to do each step: turn on the water, soap up his body, put shampoo in his hair, rinse off, turn off the water, dry off with a towel, get dressed. In my early thirties at the time, I was numb on the drive home.

One of the remedies or deterrents to preserve the mind that I always seem to read about is to keep mentally active. Even Cicero recommended this two millennia ago. Rush did likewise,

but he made a point of especially prescribing a literary antidote.

An illustrious literary case is the elderly Sophocles. He was supposedly sued by his sons for mental incompetence in managing his affairs. In his defense the great-grandfather of drama used a singularly simple and devastating defense: he read aloud from his most recent work, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and was duly declared sound in mind (and then some). That play, in fact, was his swan song of over a hundred dramas he wrote before he died at around ninety.

Another such case but on the other end of the memory spectrum is Ralph Waldo Emerson. Who could've been more literary, after all? But in the last decade of his life, in his late sixties, his memory began to fail. In his last few years he had to decline invitations to speak at celebrations and events. Otherwise he was in good health. I remember reading that he couldn't recall the names of simple objects and had to have tags attached to everyday physical objects so he would know what to call them.

Rush also mentions that the same mental protection could be derived from taking part in business, politics (which in the current case of our soon-to-be-octogenarian president is a miserable failure), and religion. But of course the latter for Christians is much, much more than that.

The Bible, in fact, has quite a bit to say about old age. In Leviticus God, speaking through Moses, commands the Israelites to respect their elders: "Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head, and honor the face of the old man, and fear thy God: I am the Lord." Moses himself lived till he was 120 years old. And Deuteronomy, amazingly, reports that right up until his death "his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated." Interestingly Moses didn't become the chosen spokesman of God and the earthly leader of Israel until he was eighty.

In the New Testament the apostle Paul instructs his protégé Timothy: “Rebuke not an elder, but intreat him as a father; and the younger men as brethren.”

Ironically I witnessed a shameful episode of ageism, as it’s now known, in the evangelical church that my wife and I used to attend. My closest friend there is in his early eighties, he was the oldest by far of three pastors who also serve as elders along with two other lay members. It’s a long story, but the other elders, three of whom make up the inner circle and are in their fifties, including the de facto lead pastor, disregarded everything my friend said or any suggestion he made. He also defended me when the de facto lead pastor slandered me, which my faithful brother in the faith then told me about.

The upshot was they essentially forced him out. And when he graciously agreed to retire, to avoid an open feud, though he had no intention or desire to step aside at the time but that’s what he allowed them to tell the congregation, the de facto lead pastor hypocritically praised him.

My friend still guest-preaches around the area. I talk to him regularly on the phone, and we go out to lunch now and then. He has a deep but gentle voice that seems to me like that of an Old Testament prophet, stands over six feet tall, has a deep well of stories and a robust sense of humor. I used him as a reference once, and when the person asked him if there was anything he’d like to add after singing my praises he said, “Well there is one thing. He’s only five foot six.” And when he told me he laughed his hearty laugh.

The ancient Chinese and the American Indians are well known for revering the elderly as wise men of good counsel. Cicero mentions how an Athenian veteran of advanced years came into the theater when the Olympic Games were going on and couldn’t find a seat and none of his countrymen offered him one. But the Spartan ambassadors, who had reserved seats, rose out of

respect for him and offered him one of theirs. One of them—an official of one of the most warlike nations of the ancient world—observed in a remark that I think might be said to the elders at the evangelical church I used to attend: "The Athenians know what is right, but will not do it."

Carl Jung was a modern proponent of the utility of old age, which he called "the afternoon of life." He didn't start writing his memoir *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, arguably his most well-known book, until he was about eighty. Indeed I think there is much for an older person to do and to learn if they're motivated. As the sixty-eight-year-old Thomas Jefferson wrote in a letter to his friend and portraitist Charles Wilson Peale: "But though an old man, I am but a young gardener."

What exactly is old? The average age of life expectancy in our country is now seventy-seven years (about eighty for women, seventy-four for men), according to a 2020 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Phrases come to mind like "quality of life" and "biological age" and "sixty is the new forty" (I'm not sure I'd want to be forty again). Adam, even after the Fall, lived till he was 930, and Abraham was 175. By the time Moses wrote Psalm 90 in the late fifteenth century BC, man's life had been drastically curtailed: "The days of our years are threescore years and ten," but what is usually forgotten or ignored is the rest of the verse: "and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away."

But what's the alternative? It's one of the great paradoxes of human existence—most people want to live a long life, but nobody wants to grow old. So we get ludicrous and futile end runs like cryogenics and "Singularity"—a frozen corpse or a cyber Frankenstein. Ezekiel Emanuel, an oncologist and so-called bioethicist, has said he only wants to live till he's seventy-five. To me this is nothing more than hubris, and

maybe a counterintuitive ploy in the global crusade to rid the planet of what the rulers consider undesirables.

So no matter how youthful I may look or feel, I and everyone else alive at the moment will be "cut off" sooner or later. But I remember what Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians that "to die is gain," since he would then be with God and Christ. I also think of the bluegrassy gospel standard that takes the phrase in Moses's song and runs with it:

> *Some glad morning when this life is o'er, I'll fly away*
> *To a home on God's celestial shore, I'll fly away*
> *I'll fly away, oh glory, I'll fly away*
> *When I die, hallelujah by and by, I'll fly away*

Until that day, however, my wife and I will press on, doing whatever God has appointed for us to do. Which reminds me: Rush reports in his geriatric study that all but one person who lived to an old age had been married. And I bet, as our perceptive restaurant host observed, that they were happy.

Table of Contents

Jeff Plude is a Contributing Editor to *New English Review*. He was a daily newspaper reporter and editor for the better part of a decade before he became a freelance writer. He has an MA in English literature from the University of Virginia. An evangelical Christian, he also writes fiction and is a freelance editor of novels and nonfiction books.