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Growing Old Successfully

UP until a few years ago old age was looked upon as something that just happened, with little or nothing to be done about it. Today, because of advances in medical science and new ways of thinking about significant things, we are exploring the possibility that instead of approaching old age furtively and accepting it in a spirit of resignation we may make of it a new and thrilling time of life.

Not only people over forty, but people in their thirties, are beginning to plan so that their years after sixty may be rich, rewarding and happy.

Preparation is necessary. If we come up to the crest of life at sixty or sixty-five without plans, we may find ourselves gazing out upon a future that is deadly dull, flat, and uninviting.

After middle-age the days slip by more and more quickly, leaving not enough time for the work and pleasure we wish to crowd into them. Part of the reason is that we are being called upon, by virtue of the knowledge and judgment we have gained through the years, to give advice and guidance to younger people and in new affairs, while at the same time we try to do all the things we are accustomed to do and wish to do.

This, likely, is one of the hardest lessons to learn: to pick and choose among the many things these later years have to offer, instead of leaping at life open-armed, trying to encompass it all at once.

We gain a new sense of values, and are less impatient. Our satisfactions weigh more. Our disappointments are not as bitter as when we were in our twenties, because we have other disappointments to measure them against.

Longevity

It isn't many years ago since "longevity" was a new word in common talk. A hundred years ago the average life expectancy at birth on this continent was only 40 years: today in Canada it is 66.3 years for men and 70.8 years for women.

Herein lies the great difference between this and preceding centuries. There were always a few who lived to old age, but today there are many who live twenty or thirty years longer than the average of a century ago. What has been increased, through hygiene, medical knowledge, and better living conditions, is not the potential length of life of human beings, but their chances of survival.

The results are specially impressive in early life, due to the conquest of so many infectious diseases by medical science, but substantial progress has also been made at the ages when men are gainfully employed and women are bringing up their children. Better than two out of every three men who are now 20 years of age, and more than four out of every five women at that age, will survive beyond their 65th birthday. The corresponding figure was only about one in every two for the men born prior to 1860.

Canadian mortality tables based on census statistics have yielded these figures:

Expectation of Life

Age:	*1931*	*1941*	*1947*	*1951*
	Men			
Birth	60.00	62.96	65.18	66.33
20	49.05	49.57	50.48	50.76
40	31.98	31.87	32.37	32.45
60	16.29	16.06	16.46	16.49
	Women			
Birth	62.10	66.30	69.05	70.83
20	49.76	51.76	53.33	54.41
40	33.02	33.99	35.00	35.63
60	17.15	17.62	18.25	18.64

It will be seen that, as a general rule, women live longer than men. This used to be attributed to different working and living conditions, but nowadays women live much as men do, work alongside them, and are exposed to the same strains and accidents.

Kenneth Walker speculates interestingly in his book *Commentary on Age* (published by Jonathan Cape, London): "Woman's psychological, as well as her physical,

equipment for old age is also better than that of a man. . . . She is a specialist in personal relationships and, unlike her husband, is far more interested in people than in ideas. Fortunately for her, these interests of hers do not necessarily disappear when she retires from work, and as a result of this she is more likely to remain contented."

Science and old age

Medical science does not claim that it has found an Elixir of Life. All it claims to have done — and it is a great deal — is to have reduced the incidence of some diseases that tend to shorten life. We do not yet know to what extent the changes in body machinery which accompany advancing age are due to the constitution of the species, and how much they are caused by the incidents of living, such as diet, infections, emotional stresses, overwork, laziness, gluttony, and so forth.

We are not even qualified to state with certainty what is the normal span of human life. The oldest ages recorded with some reasonable degree of accuracy, 109 and 112 years, may be extended under conditions of existence that will be discovered by science. Dr. James A. Tobey goes so far as to say, in *Technology Review* (published at The Massachusetts Institute of Technology): "Most scientists believe that natural death due to old age never occurs. Every human death must be attributed to an accidental cause, such as heart disease, pneumonia, or some other exigency."

The effort being made by scientists is directed mainly along two lines: to prevent the house of our years falling around us in premature tragic collapse, and to make the added years happy to live.

Longevity with vigour and usefulness is an objective worthy of the best and most energetic efforts, not only by organizations but by individuals. We should stop at once our habit of thinking: "I'm past 50; I have to expect aches and pains." Neither patient nor doctor should give way to defeatist thought — at least not until every avenue for betterment has been tried by both.

Nothing will contribute more to unhappy old age than surrender to the idea that elderly men and women have had their day, and that all that can be done for them is to look after them. This attitude to old age is, says Walker in *Commentary on Age:* "medically, psychologically, sociologically, and — what should be of still greater importance to a civilization based on economics — economically unsound. It is a counsel of despair."

So far as health goes, the remedy is simple: stop thinking of treatment of ills as merely applying a temporary patch to a worn fabric, and think positively — how to keep the fabric in shape for long and comfortable use.

Everyone, of whatever age, should have periodical medical examinations, but these are especially needed after middle life. People under forty are likely to put this advice on one side with the remark that they will worry about such things when they have to. But what will happen to them after sixty is already shaping itself. Repeated or untended insults to their bodies: infections, malnutrition, obesity, emotional turbulence, poisons, alcoholism, drug addiction, overwork: these produce unnatural wear and tear.

All of the infirmities of old age are not inevitable, if only people will think forward, give medical men a chance to detect and treat ailments in their early stages, and do what the doctors order. Health and longevity are not inherent rights, but privileges, and as such they carry the obligation to make an effort to earn them.

Why worry?

Some people worry without any more justification than that they feel it is something they should do. It is perfectly normal for a person to ponder the things that might have been, to shed a few quiet tears over unclaimed opportunities, to sort fondly through a box of souvenirs, but then he should turn quickly and briskly to the future. The most dangerous phrase in post middle-age language is "What's the use?" It is of great importance to take thought for the morrow, while not fretting and worrying ourselves uselessly.

At whatever age we may be, life consists in progress, and we defraud ourselves and cause disharmony if we cling obstinately to one phase of it. Some great musicians were guilty of working up to colossal climaxes and then blasting away at the same chord over and over again, ruining the moment by being reluctant to leave it.

One who has early formed good habits of living, picked up the important techniques of adjustment, and acquired a good philosophy, will go on, despite birthdays, to adventure and develop. A man of 65 may be as vital as the average man of 40, and may show no sign of old age except an accumulation of wisdom.

This does not mean that everyone can count on being a Jean Borotra, playing competitive tennis at Wimbledon in his 58th year, or a John W. Davis, arguing a great constitutional case before the Supreme Court of the United States on the threshold of his 80th year. It does mean that everyone who takes care to preserve health and spirit through youth and middle age can count on being fit to enjoy success in his own line of activity right up to the end, barring accidents.

Increasing age is something about which to be sensible. It is a great boon to have the proper spirit of one's age, to abandon attempts to appear younger than one is, to take on significant responsibilities instead of juvenile ones; to give up the pretense of cleverness, rectitude and infallibility, and to become willing to be accepted or rejected for what one is.

Many business men in their sixties and seventies will tell of the relief it is to be passed over by committees and forgotten by campaigning organizations and neglected by speakers committees: events that would have been heart-breaking thirty years before. Far from feeling neglected, they are exhilarated by their freedom to be interested in new facets of life that appeal to their new maturity.

No cause for pessimism

With more older people alive today than at any other time in the world's history, everyone has reason to think about this new situation. There is, however, little cause to take a pessimistic attitude. Dr. Lawrence E. Ranta, medical director of the Vancouver General Hospital, said in *Canadian Welfare* that there is no proof that persons over 65 present the community with a social or medical problem disproportionate to the assets that the community has gained by becoming healthier.

Economically, there is a temporary burden laid upon the shoulders of younger people, but this will decrease as we improve the health of elderly people and find ways of enabling them to carry their proportionate share of production and economic usefulness. An editorial in *Maclean's* at the end of May remarked: "We could bring to bear on their problems the same human genius, the same dogged perseverance, the same patience and devotion, the same fine sense of adventure and discovery that gave the world a vaccine for polio. We could probably do this without spending a single extra dollar and in the long run we might even save some dollars."

How big a problem?

The most important external factor determining the high proportion of aged persons in our population today was the heavy surge of immigration prior to 1931. Between 1901 and 1931, more than 4½ million people entered Canada, most of whom were between 20 and 40 years of age.

There have been remarkable advances during the past generation or two in medical service, sanitation, curative and preventive medicine, with their consequent reduction in death rates. It has been said that thirty per cent of the persons who reach 65 owe their survival to advances in public health and medicine made since they were born.

Tradition looks upon 35 as the middle age. In 1921, 67 per cent of Canada's people were under 35, and 33 per cent were 35 and over. By 1951 there were 61 per cent under 35 and 39 per cent 35 and over. Still more striking are the comparative figures for persons of older age. In 1921 the proportion of our population 60 and over was 7.5 per cent; in 1951 it was 11.4 per cent. In 1921 only 4.8 per cent were over 64; in 1951 the figure was 7.8 per cent.

A publication of the Dominion Bureau of Statistics in October tells us that Canada's death rate dropped to the lowest point on record in 1954, the eleventh consecutive annual decrease, a decline of almost 20 per cent in a little over a decade.

The ages at which death occurred provide interesting reading. A little over 11 per cent of all deaths were of infants under one year of age; 9 per cent of persons between one and 40 years of age; 16 per cent between 40 and 60; 44 per cent between 60 and 80; and 20 per cent over 80 years of age. It is estimated in *Canadian Welfare* that whereas the population of men and women aged 65 and over in 1951 was 1,086,000, it will be 1,610,000 by 1971. The *Labour Gazette* estimates the 1971 figure 20,000 higher.

Youth and age

Each phase of life has its own significance and each is invested with its appropriate responsibilities and activities.

V. Sackville-West wrote in *All Passion Spent*: "Youth had no beauty like the beauty of an old face; the face of youth was an unwritten page." But youth has urges and energies that are only memories to the aged. Part of our difficulty is that we are trying to force both into a common mould. The *Financial Post* printed a cartoon in which a youthful college graduate and an elderly man are looking at a sign in an employment office: "Men wanted. Must be young and experienced."

To every part of life has been assigned its own peculiar appropriate quality, and our effort must be directed toward extracting the best of all. We need not dwell on the sombre side of age, but only to acknowledge at each period the virtues and disabilities of the other. Lord Beaverbrook said, at 75 years of age, without relinquishing an iota of his prestige and leadership: "Henceforward I do not intend to put grave issues to the test. Younger men must carry the lance and wear the breast-plate."

There are courtesies as well as duties due by people of one age to those of another age. While young people owe respect and help to their parents, the parents should set the children free at an appropriate age, establishing their relations on the basis of mutual consideration.

Youths should know that older people have a reserve of wisdom and quiet inner strength learned by long practice in adaptation, and that this can be called upon as a significant antidote to the stresses and strains induced by the fears, the vanities, the greeds and the ignorance encountered by young people.

But advice should not be forced upon young people: it was William Congreve who wrote in one of his comedies a couple of centuries ago: "Old men give good advice only when they are no longer able to give bad examples." Indeed, discreet older people will refrain from telling stories about the olden days as a means of "improving" younger people. A good rule is to volunteer stories of the past only to children under eight and to persons of one's own age.

On the other hand, young people need to appreciate and esteem the fact that older people have aged successfully when they have discovered or created for themselves effective roles in society. In China, says Lin Yutang in *The Importance of Living*, the first question a person asks the other on an official call, after asking about his name, is "What is your glorious age?" If the person replies apologetically that he is 23 or 28, the other party generally comforts him by saying that he has still a glorious future, and that one day he may become old. But if the person replies that he is 35 or 38, the other party immediately exclaims with deep respect, "Good luck!" Enthusiasm grows in proportion as a man is able to report a higher and a higher age, and if he is over 50 the inquirer drops his voice in respect.

Meaningful old age

Living a few years longer is not so important as living the years meaningfully. Many people — and not least of all business and professional men — declare that the years after 65 are the most interesting and gratifying part of their lives.

A philosopher compares life to a piece of embroidery, of which, during the first half of his life, a man gets a sight of the right side, and during the second half, of the wrong side. The wrong side is not so pretty as the right, but it is more instructive: it shows the way in which the threads have been worked together.

Only when we look back at the long course of our life and its general result can we see the why and wherefore of it all. A thousand things become clear which were formerly obscure, and we gain a satisfying feeling of difficulties overcome.

With advancing age we receive unexpected rewards and compensations. We escape slavery to convention; we detect the superficial things and pay attention to the significant; we enjoy being patient; we have outgrown our keenest acrimonies; we are free of uneasy craving; we are no longer pompous and self-regarding; we have a feeling of immense relief from the number of dangers we have escaped; we have advanced from what was promised to what is fulfilled.

This is not to say that we must rest on our oars. A survey reported this year in *Industry* reveals that 64 per cent of the world's great achievements have been accomplished by men who have passed their 60th birthday. Between 60 and 70 years of age, 35 per cent of the world's great achievements were accomplished; 23 per cent between 70 and 80, and 8 per cent after 80.

Sir William Van Horne, builder of the Canadian Pacific Railway, said no man comes to the subconscious co-ordination of details necessary to control a vast system until he is 60. And if we forsake the mundane things of business to seek a lesson in knight errantry, we find that when the first lances of all Christendom were Chandos of England and Du Gueselin of France, John Chandos was over 70 and blind in one eye. Retiring and soft-spoken he was, but when the earth stirred to a slow thunder of armies the most dreaded device on a shield was still the red pile of Chandos.

Not a rocking chair

The paradise we seek for old age is not a rocking chair in which to sit and twiddle our thumbs, but a place where we may use our strength and gifts and knowledge and experience to finish our job or to do other jobs for which we never had time. Activity in a useful role gives us a feeling of adequacy and accomplishment.

Our faces may be scribbled over with autobiographical notes that tell past hopes, fears, joys, angers and disappointments, but life always begins where we are. We should have a purpose; we should still want to do something; we should still look ahead expectantly.

Hobbies need not be merely pastimes: they can be stimulating, enjoyable and remunerative, providing outlets for our creative impulses and our self-expression. They should be planned for and worked toward from our middle years, and at the proper period of our development they should be ready to step in to fill the vacancies in our lives. Said 87-year-old Frank Wise as he set up his exhibition of bookbinding at Montreal's first Golden Age Hobby Show this year: "I just haven't time to grow old."

And when Colonel Anderson, who at 91 was the dean of United States portrait artists, was asked: "What is your greatest picture?" he replied "I haven't painted it yet."

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