

# **Westward of Forty-Five: How to Grow Old**

by

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We think that just as autumn is the period of dissolution and decay in the natural world, so is the latter part of human life a similar period. We feel that just as the full-blown beauties of the summer wither and disappear in these [chillier] days, so the splendid powers of manhood and womanhood crumble and perish in the declining years of old age. And just as we are tempted to lament the passing of the flowers and the birds and the fresh green leaves, so we are tempted to lament the passing of the alert step, the eager gesture, the flashing eye, the full tone of voice, the hearty laugh, the tireless energy and happy strength. ... But to look at it in another way, autumn is not ... a period which marks the passing and end of life. On the contrary, it marks the fullness and completion of life, the beautiful maturing of that which was blossoming in the spring and growing in the summer. And so, we find that in human life as in nature the period of old age is the glad season of the harvest, a period not only of decay but of fruitage, the period in which has come the maturity of all those attributes of personality which were cultivated during the early years of adulthood.

The second reason for my subject is the fact that I have reached the age of forty-five, which is generally considered the mid-channel of human life. Doctor Stanley Hall [first president of the American Psychological Association] speaks of the period which I have now entered as the youth of old age. Whether it be the youth of old age or the old age of youth, it does mark a turning period in a person's life ... If we think of life as a binomial curve rising from a baseline at birth and sinking into it again at death, then [middle-age] brings me to the highest point of the curve, the Crest of the wave ... And so there comes to everyone about this time the realization that the tide that "drew us from out of the boundless deep" begins to "turn again home" ... But in youth we have ideals of maturity. Why not do the same when we're mature for the next stage? Why should not forty plan for eighty just as intently as twenty does for forty, as if the forty-year-old is in one's infancy; The fifties are one's childhood, the sixties one's youth, and at seventy [and beyond] one attains maturity.

The region lying westward of [middle age] is one we shall all traverse if we live long enough, and our experience there will be largely a reaping of what in the earlier period we have sown. That a successful sewing is not too easy is evident from the failures that are everywhere apparent, [which explains] the bad repute into which old age has fallen ... The hardest thing about life [for] most people is it's growing old; to see the bloom fading out of the cheek, the sparkle out of the eye, the vigor out of the limb, and worst of all the poetry

out of the soul. As the October of the year, even when lighted with all the splendors of ripened fruit and reddened leaf, has a sadness about it that is never felt in the stormiest days of Spring, so the October of life, even when surrounded with all the accumulations of maturity and success, has a shadow hanging over it such as never comes to youth's dreariest March.

There is no better evidence of the attitude of people toward old age than the age-long endeavor to find some means of preventing it, beginning with the early explorers hope of discovering the Fountain of Youth whose waters were to wash away all the stains and wrinkles of age, down through the chemist's long search for the Elixir of Life which would restore men to their vanished prime, to drinking of buttermilk to kill the germs which cause the degeneracy, or the transference of monkey or goat glands to bring back an [old man's] boyhood freshness and vigor. But in spite of all this quest, old age remains a fact that every man and woman must face; So that the real problem is not how to avoid old age, but how to make the most of it.

There is no doubt that in one sense ... old age is a decline, a disease which no medicine can cure. On one great side of our life, the physical side, whatever our earlier precautions and preparations, we are, after a certain age certainly on the downgrade. We have ceased to be athletes. We take up the less exerting sports for our exercise. We can no longer draw on almost unlimited physical reserve. We tire much more easily ... But all that is not all nor perhaps the worst. One of the fatal accusations against the latter half of life is that it lacks interest. A person by that time may have gained a fortune only to discover that the pleasures they hoped to purchase with it have ceased to be pleasures ... [as] a deadly monotony sets in toward the end of life. One is like the boy Thackeray tells about in *Vanity Fair*, "When he was a boy, he wanted taffy but did not have the sixpence; when he grew older. he had the sixpence but did not want the taffy." The fact is that the wonder of life has, by this time, frequently disappeared; and it is the sense of wonder that makes life really worthwhile. [As the English polymath] John Ruskin said, "I had rather lived in a cottage and wonder at everything than live in Warwick Castle and wonder at nothing."

Even worse than this, some physiologists and some psychologists ... maintain that there is a decay of moral enthusiasm in life's after-period, which renders the average middle-aged person less ethically valuable ... History is full of stories of a youth of high moral promise dashed by the latter years. Had Henry VIII died young, he would have appeared in our annals as a hero instead of a monster. Nero, when the pupil of Seneca, had excellent aspirations. In reading Plutarch's life of Alexander, one is struck with his deterioration of character, from the earlier warmth and generosity to the latter caprice and cruelty ... The inner deterioration experienced by some in their latter years was expressed in somewhat startling fashion to me some years ago by a noted minister ... "It is you young men," said he,

“who must start the new ventures. It is no use looking to us old fellows, who believe in nothing and nobody.”

All of this is evidence of something seriously wrong somewhere. To declare half of our life to be necessarily a failure is to bring an indictment against life altogether ... Either the order or the universe which ordains old age is faulty, or the failure lies in the interpretation of and obedience to that order ... We have been told year after year, that of course this life is hard and sorrowful, but that matters little because it lasts but a few years, while there awaits us beyond the river of death and eternity of ease and happiness ... To put the Now and Here of earth in such complete opposition to the Then in There of heaven is to endeavor to extract from time and place what they were never intended to yield. If the worthwhile life cannot be lived here and now, it can be lived nowhere and nowhen.

All of which brings me back to my opening suggestion, in which the view of life as a probation is taken in the sense that the after part reaps what the earlier part has sown; and fails to reap what the earlier part has failed to sow. The failure, where failure there is, lies not in the game, but in the fact that we do not know how to play the game. Properly understood and followed, the human career, if we interpret it rightly to its very end, should be full of freshness and benediction. The whole business resolves itself into a question whether life's afterpart is to be considered by us as a decline or as part of a growth. Shall we think of life as a hill, one side of which we climb during the first half, while we descend the other side in the latter half? Or shall we consider it a hill which we continue to ascend until the very end?

Decay is always going on somewhere, in every part of our human career ... The foetus life and some of its aspects perishes when the child is born. Infancy and adolescence have each their growth, culmination, and ending as the [child] pushes on toward the [adult]. But these losses do not make mankind of less worth. And so, while certain phases of mature [adult]hood may perish as we reach old age, these do in no sense render old age less worthwhile ... [For] old age has its blessing as well as youth or mature adulthood, and blessings I'm inclined to think as worthwhile as those of the earlier periods of life.

... With all the attractions of youth, there is no one, very few at least, who would wish to go back to all that it was; and with all the drawbacks of age, no one, or very few at least, would wish to give up everything that [age] has brought to him ... And this, I presume is what all of us do really wish for when we speak about desiring again to be young—the blessings of youth along with those of maturity and age; the beauty, health, vigor of body and freshness of feeling, which belonged to life's prime, accompanied with the balance of character, the breadth of experience, the treasures of love and knowledge that have been gathered up in its latter years. We want life to be like an apple tree that bears on its branches at the same

time fragrant flower and luscious fruit—all the vigor and bloom of youth without its ignorance and inexperience, and all the wisdom and worth of age without its wrinkles and weariness.

So old age has its blessings as well as youth, only these blessings are more mental and spiritual than they are physical; and once we gain this attitude toward it, everything assumes a new aspect ... It is well to persuade ourselves, and the sooner in life the better, that there is no possible way of making our after-middle life a success except [by]considering ourselves in this world mainly and ultimately for mental and spiritual growth, ... that the one thing worthwhile in this life is the development of a soul. And this will indeed save that after-period from monotony ... Every time we add to our mental equipment or experience of life, old things take on new shape; everything becomes imbued with new meaning. I can remember as a freshman in college I read Emerson's essays and wondered why people thought them worth anything. Ten years later, after having gained some experience and a larger mental outlook, I read them again and thought they were quite good. But at the age of 45, [having] experienced some of the things Emerson experienced and gained some of the mental outlook he had, I find them a treasure of knowledge and inspiration.

And so, as our inner nature develops, our world becomes even more beautiful. If each new spring does not bring us a deeper message it is because we have been neglecting our inner life. To the growing soul the world is ever renewing itself. Our fellow men grow always dearer to us, always more interesting. And how much more interesting does the whole order of the universe become! ... [But] as I have already said ... we reap what we sow, and if we do not sow anything we must not expect to reap anything ... and if you do not sew and cultivate in your earlier life the things of the spirit, then you must expect an old age impoverished, barren, destitute of any interest, a bore to yourself and everyone else.

This is the point I wish to impress upon you who are not yet too old ... that which is not used shrivels up and dies ... No doubt some of you have seen those fish in Mammoth Cave [that] have no eyes. They still have eye sockets, but because they have lived in the pitch dark so long their eyes have atrophied. Nature is very economical. It never takes the trouble to feed an organ or faculty that is not used ... and if it does not entirely disappear it becomes only a rudiment, a vestige of what it was .... This is just as true in the mental realm as it is the physical. ... There are people who have lost their ability to enjoy music simply because they have not cultivated an appreciation of music, [or] with no appreciation of natural beauty simply because they have never cultivated it, [or] people who are unable to find any joy in reading a book simply because they have not developed any literary taste ...

And so if I were asked for a recipe of how to grow old on the basis of this principle that our earlier life is a preparation for our latter life, I should say first ... that one should accumulate and save enough money to keep comfortable during old age, and no more. I cannot conceive of old age being a blessing in poverty, neither can I conceive of it being a blessing if [one] is burdened with wealth. In the second place, one should, above all things, preserve [one's] health so that old age will not be burdened by physical disability and distress. In the third place, one should develop a taste for the aesthetic things in life, an appreciation of the natural beauty of the world, of art, of music, of literature, for these things, above all, bring enjoyment to [our] latter years. Fourthly, one should train [one's] mind that it becomes a keen instrument of impression and expression, for it is through [one's] mind that [we establish] contact between [ourselves] and the world. Education, in this sense, makes a [person's] life so full and rich and especially in [our] latter days, that [we] might consider the extent of [our] education the [greatest] measure of [our] wealth.

Lastly, ... nothing can make old age more worthwhile than the consciousness that others think well of [us] and are glad to welcome us into their hearts and homes. [Not] only should we develop those things which give us a good reputation among [others], but those deeper qualities of mind and heart which bring into our lives friendship and love and all the glad association of kinship with our kind. The [person] who, during the earlier period of life, follows this recipe can look forward to latter life with joy ...

And now just a personal word, if you will pardon it, at the close ... If it were not for the Almanac, I would not know whether I am 45 or 25. I feel exactly the same today as I did then ... I do not mean that my body would stand the strain it was given in those days; But I mean that it performs what is required of it today just as well as it did what was required of it then. I probably do not react to extreme exertion quite so well as I did ten years ago, and when I lose sleep I seem to miss it more than I did in earlier days, and when I look in the mirror I find gray hairs; but aside from these few signs I have never been in better physical condition than I am at the present.

But you ask what about the mind? Isn't that where middle age shows itself most? Who was it said no man learns anything new, or is even hospitable to new ideas, after forty? Look at your brain cells, not your hair—says someone. Aren't you getting old fashioned and reactionary? Isn't the armchair of conservatism becoming comfortable, the slippers of convention warm, and the glowing hearth fire of the status quo a cozy abiding place? Well, if so, I am not aware of it. For five years I have been watching for the first symptoms of hardening of the brain cells. I have been watching for a moment when I should find myself outraged by the heresies of some young chap who ought to be spanked and put to bed. I have been waiting for the thrilling experience of meeting a new idea which would shock me instead of interest me. But in vain. If anybody has anything new to say I want to hear it. I

cherish a kind of longing to taste every variety of experience; but I still wait in vain for the experience of meeting a [person] or a movement that seems to me dangerous, or an idea that ought in decency to be suppressed ...

Not only that, but I expect to have more fun during the next twenty years than I had during the last ... I feel that I am now just reaching my full powers, mentally and physically, capable of more work and better work, more play and better play, and with so many years of play and work ahead of me that I never so much as think of my age. Every Monday morning, I am eager to get right at my next address, and to make it a better piece of work than any I've ever done.

Life is not a hill, one half of it spent in ascent and the other half in descent. I have no feeling of starting downhill; or having reached the top of any hill. If you want to call my life a hill, then you must confine it to the one side because I see the road rising just as steadily and pleasantly ahead of me now as when I was twenty. And the top of it is so far from where I am now, and so much higher, that I cannot even see it. It is a long winding road. good all the way, and I am looking forward to finding the freshest, brightest flowers and the sweetest, solidest fruits beyond the [middle] post.

So, I am going to keep on climbing, trying to be normal at every stage of the journey; and I'm not going to deceive myself twenty-five years from now by calling myself "seventy years young." I'm going to be seventy years old. I have no desire to be a childish, immature old man; but a mature and ripened one, enjoying the normal condition of seventy [or eighty, or ninety] as I now enjoy the normal condition of [middle age]. So I can say to you in the words of Robert Browning—Come

“Grow old along with me!  
The best is yet to be,  
That last of life, for which the first was made!”