

## On Turning Seventy

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Turning 70, like the knowledge that one is going to be hanged in the morning, has a tendency to concentrate the mind. According to one actuarial table, the fact that I've reached 70 (or will in a few weeks) means that, *on average*, I could live another 13.73 years, *or* (another way of looking at it) the probability of my dying TODAY! is 2.6%, even before I finish this sentence! (And,, that worked out.) To be honest I'm not sure what average means here. I have an average intellect (a first class second class mind, I've always said), though my body might be somewhat below average at this point: I've had two cancers, which could lower my averages, and I have an esophagus that is at risk to becoming cancerous. Otherwise, I'm A-okay.

I do work out. Always have. Also, I turned vegetarian seven or eight years ago, and I'm pretty sure that's helped. The only thing I miss is chicken. My wife, who turned vegetarian with me, mostly misses turkey. Steak? never. I don't think I'd eat steak if I did eat meat. This is interesting: In the 1840s (I think it was in the 1840s), this Canadian doctor found a soldier who had been shot in the stomach, and miraculously lived, even though he continued to sport an open hole that went through his side and *into his stomach*. The doctor wanted to test how long foods took to digest, different foods: vegetables, fruits, sea food, and of course meat—beef. The man agreed. So the doctor would take a food, like a piece of meat, tie it to a string, insert it into the man's stomach, then periodically pull it out to see how much remained undigested. Not surprising, beef took the most time, veggies the least. We know today that this difference, over time, has a significant health effect, like on the pancreas, because the pancreas has to work harder, producing significantly more insulin, when we eat meats. Anyway. Interesting. And then there's this: prostate cancer is endemic in the West but rare in the East (though this is changing). Why? There appears to be a connection between eating large amounts of animal protein and prostate cancer. I mentioned this to my urologist right before he did my second set of biopsies. I mentioned I might turn vegetarian. He laughed, said it was too late for me. Still, I gave up meat. The other cancer was kidney. They took my right kidney out. But there's not much to tell there.

I'm mentally alert: I read a lot, and that's supposed to be good for you. To be honest, if I don't look in a mirror I don't think about being as old(er), and frankly I'm shocked when I do see my reflection looking back. Kids will let you know. A pissed-off teenage sent to me for counseling recently reminded me, telling me I was going to die soon. I didn't take that too seriously, considering the source.

I'm guessing you have to get sick before you can fully realize the existential impact of mortality. As long as you're feeling the way I feel right now (which, I have to confess, is great) the fact of death remains fairly academic. I hate to say this, but I never even got sick with cancer, which is unbelievable. But I've seen other's suffer—friends, and it was horrible. That's why I don't say anything. It's embarrassing.

My wife gets a bar journal magazine about once a quarter. She's a retired lawyer. I don't think she looks at it. I do. I go right to the obituaries, only they call them "Memorials." I look for "early deaths," I call them: lawyers who've died young, or younger. With the older ones, I see that as normal, that they lived a nice long life and that's about all you can ask for. My cutoff age between long and short used to be around 70, but now 70 seems kind of on the short side. Now I'm thinking 75—80 for sure. I don't know how they pick the ones they pick (they only allow two pages). I'm pretty sure more die between issues. I'm thinking those that get in were more political. I don't mean political-political, more like hobnob—backslappers, high energy types, and their last accomplishment was getting in to "Memorials." The youngest in the latest edition was 57 (I've seen them in their 30s). But christ, 57.

I can say with absolute certainty I would never get in "Memorials." I'm like Johnny Depp, I hate attention. I think this goes back to when I was a teenager. When I was a teenager I was arrested for shoplifting. I got a lot of attention that day. That was the only day my dad ever hit me with a closed fist in the face, which, if you want to know, is preferable to a belt all over the place, which was his preferred teaching method.

Needless to say I don't want a big funeral. What a racket. It cost me \$10,000.00 to put my mother in the ground. What's the point of buying a casket that looks good enough to put in your living room then drop it into a hole in the ground? Who thought that one up? And a tombstone for christ sake. My parents' tombstone cost a cool \$700.00, *excluding* names and dates. But they

don't give away cremations either. I Googled cremations, and that's about \$1,500.00, although I did see one for just shy of \$800.00. Now if I were a cat (we have eight cat urns in the upstairs closet), I could get away with about \$25.00, but they say you never know if you're getting *your* cat's ashes back, so that's another racket.

When you're my age you go to a lot of funerals. Just for the record, I prefer funerals to weddings. The way I figure it, funerals mark the end of bad things happening where weddings mark the beginning. I know that makes me sound like a complete pessimist, which I'm not, although I do lean in that direction. Actually, I'm glad I was born when I was, although not necessarily to the people I was born to. I've always said I was born and raised in a bubble—a kind of situational bubble—where nothing bad ever happened, comparatively speaking, because outside the bubble the whole friggin place was on fire, and in the process of blowing up completely—a world war mind you. Not for me though. And when I finally got old enough to realize I was alive the world war was over and America was beginning the greatest economic expansion in the history of the world. How lucky was that? Think of the odds. I didn't know any of this of course. I was a kid. Kids can't see beyond their noses. I thought this was just the way things were, that it had always been like inside the bubble, and would be forever. As a result, I never felt any sense of urgency, to take advantage. I do now, believe me.

Want to know what life inside the bubble was like? The Truman Show—that movie about the guy who wakes up one day and realizes he's in a reality TV show, and the town he's been living in is really a studio set. That's the place. But don't get me wrong, it beats Nazi Germany, or Europe during the Plague. I was able to have regular doctor's checkups, braces, a car in high school. But still, nothing ever happened there, so I left, right after high school. But that's another story.

I can't imagine me dead. I could my parents. Not my brother though. My brother was too present to ever be dead. But he did die, just like that, out of the blue as they say. One day he's walking down the street, probably thinking about paying a bill or something, and boom, down he goes. Is that a good way to go? Some say it is. It beats suffering through a long illness. But I think I would like a little warning, get my things in order as they say.

I heard a program the other day about how humans could be evolving into another species, and fast. I can't tell you the science behind this, but frankly I've thought this for a long time. Not the fast part, but why should we think we are an endpoint in evolution? But here's the thing, this time it's not going to be some kind of non-random "selection" because the environment has changed and some of us have gotten lucky because we carry a mutant gene. This time (and apparently we're at the beginning of now) it'll be from bio-engineering, at least in part, because the technology is evolving that fast. But when I was watching this I thought, it's not going to be me, I won't be able to take advantage of any of this. I know that's selfish, but anybody in their right mind would think the same thing, and maybe me more than others because I'm something of an atheist. I say "something" because to me being an atheist is no different than being a believer in an afterlife. There's no evidence either way. Remember when Stephen Hawking came out and said there's no heaven, that it's a fairy tale? Frankly he went down a notch or two in my book when he said that. You would think he'd keep an open mind.

Someone once said that everyone, no matter how old they are, thinks they will live another twenty years. I'm not sure. If for some reason I didn't know my age, and there were no mirrors to give me a hint, and people treated me as some kind of generic adult—not young, not old—I might think along those lines. And because I'm not currently sick, or have a pending condition that I'm aware of, I might buy into another twenty years. But because none of those conditions exists, I'm thinking more along the lines of ten years. So now when someone like on television says "In twenty years we'll have such and such," I'll think, not me. In some ways that's good, like with global warming, which appears to be the case. In others, like all that business about evolving into a new species—well, I'll regret missing all that.

So I'm thinking, if there *is* an afterlife, how would I want it to be? My first thought is, lots of books, so I could keep on learning. My second thought (I hate to admit this, but I will) lots of sex—only casual, no-obligation-sex. I'm sure this brings me down a notch or two if you're a woman reading this, but think about the Muslims and that twenty-seven virgin business. That's the male brain at work. Of course I might not have a male brain in the afterlife. Come to think about it, I won't have a brain at all, so then it wouldn't matter. But if I did, I'd want no-obligation-sex.

I'm not big on reincarnation though. Once is plenty. And because I've already had the bubble experience, next time might not be so cozy, maybe something along the lines of a Nazi Germany, and I'm a Jew. I'm *not* Jewish, but my grandfather was supposed to be—that's the story anyway—and that's all the Nazis would need to know.

Here I'm going to sound like a cranky old man, but hasn't anyone noticed there are too many people in the world? My brother, the one who died, once worked for the U.S. Forest Service. Once a year he would have to fly over range land out in Nevada I think it was and count mustangs. If he counted too many, they would round the "too many" up and sell them, not as pets mind you, but to buyers who would have them slaughtered and turned into dog food. So the next time you feed your dog, think about that. The same goes for buffalo, and wolves. Too many, nature's out of balance, cull them back. Why don't we do that with humans? Not cull them back of course, but at least try to figure out a way to bring some sanity to the table when it comes to population growth. You know the Chinese are doing that, or trying. Thirteen million abortions in China last year. That's got to help some.

And there's too many of me—too many old people living too long. I'll be the first to admit that. I've read there was a time when this was dealt with with some efficiency. There was this South American tribe that would leave their elderly on the side of the road. Sounds cold, but if you're not productive (the elderly are not productive), and you already have a bunch of kids at home who aren't yet productive, there may not be much of a choice. And today we add to this problem by keeping alive premature infants. Sure, it's heroic. And we have the technology. And if it were my grandchild I would be the first to be for it. But is it sane? And why do we celebrate multiple births? Septuplets? What's to celebrate? It's not a hotdog eating contest.

Looking back on my life, would I change anything? Not absolutely. I would still want to be a male, because life on the planet as a female is just too complicated—because of males. I would want different parents—mine were decent enough, but we were a bad fit from the beginning. I would keep my brother as he just as he was. I would *not* want to be raised in the midwest, the vacant heartland. I'm thinking something along the lines of a California, or maybe New England—but close enough to New York, that way I could have my cultural cake and eat it too. America? America's not all it's cracked up to be (although I wouldn't go so far as Henry Miller

in calling it an “air conditioned nightmare”—I’m 100% behind air conditioning). Europe of course could be a consideration. But where? I’m thinking the Scandinavian countries—like Norway maybe, or Finland—not France, although I’m not sure why. England? I don’t know. I’d still want English as my first language of course, for reasons too big to go into here. But the weather in England is pretty nasty. I’d forego that if I could. Definitely not Asia. I’d never survive a childhood in Asia.

I’d want to be smarter—who wouldn’t? But I’m not sure what kind of smarter. More science and math maybe, but not so much where I’d loose touch with the humanities. I’d definitely want to be a polyglot. Let’s see: like I said, English as my first language, all the important European languages (French, German, Italian, and Spanish), Japanese, Chinese (although I’m not sure which—is it Mandarin that’s suppose to be the important one?), Arabic of course—Arabic is pretty important nowadays—not modern Hebrew, but ancient for sure, and of course classical Latin and Greek.

I’d definitely want a terrific body—six-pack all the way—and a face any woman would die for, *and* a personality to match. Health? I’d want my health span to pretty much match my life span, although I’d be willing to face a short illness toward the end. I’m not sure about kids. Kids can really screw your life up. But if I’m choosing here I’d want the kind of kids that wouldn’t screw up my life. I’d definitely want daughters, because sons don’t give a rat’s ass about you when you’re old. And I’d want a sprinkling of grandchildren to enjoy.

Work’s important. I’d want the kind of job that never grew stale or boring. Maybe three or four careers, start out with something sexy, like driving fast cars, or maybe be a test pilot, to attract chics, then maybe become a university professor in midlife, probably philosophy. Then somewhere along the way I’d discover I had a talent for writing fiction, whereupon I’d give up my tenure at Harvard and retire to a New England village to write. This of course would lead to several Pulitzers and maybe a couple of Nobels. I’m not sure about marriage, because I seem to have a propensity for casual sex. If I did marry, it would have to be someone who could tolerate this, maybe even encourage it, because it helps get my creative juices flowing (note to self: rephrase this). Finally I would like to be an inspiration to young people around the world, enough for them to look past my sexual indiscretions.

That's it, really—and Jesus, reading back over the last couple of paragraphs, a little embarrassing. Whatever happened to Buddhism (I dabbled in Buddhism), some sort of spiritual life free from such base yearnings? I can see why I'm not keen on reincarnation. I tell you what, because I have a pretty good chance of reaching eighty (if I'm average, and there seems to be good evidence for that), I'll update this then. It should be a pretty intense decade, unless I get sick or get run over by a car or some worldwide catastrophe takes us all out.

So, this is me, on turning seventy, signing out.