

### Chapter Three

## Staying Younger While Getting Older

Staying younger while getting older—sounds like an oxymoron, doesn't it, puzzling in its contradictions. Yet this is what aging is in this early part of the twenty-first century. Not for everyone, of course. Some people still die at sixty, some are infirm at seventy, and more than a few live with an assortment of aches, pains, and illnesses that don't allow any illusions about staying younger. But what makes this time so interesting—and problematic—is that most of us *are* staying younger while getting older. Not just living longer, but looking better, feeling better, living better than ever before.

Standing alone, that's little more than an interesting observation. Put it in the context of the social world in which we live and it becomes a remarkable fact, one that demands our closest public and private attention. For it isn't only the old who are affected by a life that, like the Energizer Bunny, keeps going and going. This single demographic fact ricochets around the society like a shot fired in an echo chamber, undergirding the most important social and cultural changes of our time and revolutionizing the public sphere as well as the private one.

It's axiomatic that cultures change in response to changing social conditions. The demographic reality of an era is inevitably reflected in the development of new social norms and roles. As the content of socialization changes in the external world, the psychology of our internal world shifts as well. Suddenly, formerly unseen possibilities for living come into view.

So it is that throughout history the very concepts of childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age—and the cultural norms that accompany these life stages—have been shaped, at least in part, by the length of the life span. In the seventeenth century when forty was advanced old age, there was little thought to the special needs of childhood, and the idea of adolescence didn't exist. There was only youth and old age, with a few years in between for bearing and raising the next generation. Children were often betrothed just out of infancy, married in their early teens, and bore their own children as quickly as their bodies would allow. Now, it's hard to imagine sending our thirteen-year-olds into marriage. Then, when death commonly came by the mid-thirties and forty was old age, it was the only way to ensure the continuity of generations.

It took the excesses of the Industrial Revolution of the mid-eighteenth century to make childhood as "childhood" noticeable. I don't mean that children weren't cared for, valued, and even loved before that time. But their value was likely to be connected to what they could contribute in the family, whether to its economic needs in the present or in providing care for their parents in the future, rather than just because they existed.

As children as young as six, sometimes accompanied by their mothers, sometimes not, left the fields of their fathers to work in the factories of the cities, they came into public view. Until then, children, even abused children, were "family business," not a matter for public concern. With their entry into the world of working adults, they came to be seen as individuals separate from

the family unit, little ones to be sure, but nevertheless workers who earned wages, were subject to an authority other than their parents and were therefore an appropriate object of public attention. As reformers of the era brought the deplorable conditions in the factories into public awareness—children cruelly exploited, chained to machines for fourteen and more hours a day and beaten when they dropped—the idea of childhood as a stage of life deserving of special protection was born.

Adolescence would wait until advancing technology changed the requirements for industrial workers. By the mid-nineteenth century, the technology of the factory floor had changed sufficiently so that a pair of willing hands was no longer enough to get and hold a job. The burgeoning industries now required educated skills to guide the hands. Advanced public education—meaning something beyond elementary school—was the answer.

Thus was adolescence “discovered,” fed by the twin needs of the economy and society. Industry needed educated workers. The cities and towns that emerged when farmers-turned-workers flooded into the factories found themselves dealing with the threat of roving bands of unschooled and unskilled young people who, as the factories became more mechanized, now had nothing to do. The public high school seemed to offer a solution to both problems.<sup>1</sup>

Like all social innovations, however, it had unintended consequences. As these schools took shape across the land, they created the social setting in which teenagers came together for the first time and, in the process, eventually welded themselves into the kind of peer group culture we know today. Adolescence as a distinct stage of life was born and given form in the halls of America's high schools.

In our own time, we have seen extraordinary changes in the meaning of each of these life stages. Children, once valued as necessary contributors to the family economy, are now the cos-

seted, protected fodder for what Diane Ehrensaft calls "expectable parental narcissism"<sup>2</sup>—a phenomenon that has become acceptable and "expectable" only in the last few decades.

Adolescence, once defined as a haven for children between thirteen and eighteen, has now expanded its parameters into the twenties and beyond partly because the changes in the economy wrought by the post-Industrial Revolution demand a new kind of work force. As the manufacturing and industrial sectors of the economy continue to shrink, new skills are required to meet the needs of the expanding service and technology sectors. A high school diploma, once the ticket to a job that had at least the prospect of a living wage, one that could support a family, a car, and a modest house, is no longer enough. College now serves the function high school once did. It offers training and skills while keeping the young occupied and off the streets until industry and society find a place for them.

Presently, about one-quarter of our young people have at least some college. Since even those students who also hold jobs usually can't manage without additional financial help, it means that someone is paying at least part of the bill, whether through grants, loans, or parental beneficence. And that, in turn, means that post-teeners who would have been working and self-supporting in earlier times remain in a dependent, adolescent state for years.

But the needs of the economy are only one part of the story. For the other part, we have to look to our increasingly long life span, which is the bedrock on which the shift in the boundaries of our various life stages stands. I don't mean we wake up one morning and say, "Hey, now that I'll probably live to be eighty, I don't have to get married at twenty anymore." Or that we're conscious of what motivates our changing ideas about the timing and sequencing of major life events. Rather, the reality of our expanded life, a reality observed even when it doesn't fully enter

conscious thought, infuses all of us with a new and enlarged sense of life's possibilities and opportunities. Suddenly work, family, identity—all these and more are up for discussion as the new demographics give rise to a changing culture that alters our vision of the possible. We grow up later, marry later, have children later, stay on the job longer than ever before. Everything changes, all because the years stretch so far ahead.

If at eighteen you see your older siblings and their friends marrying for the first time in their late twenties, becoming parents in their mid-thirties, your grandparents alive and functioning at seventy-five, it's hard to feel any immediate urgency about growing up, getting married, having children.

"My parents want me to go to college now, but why?" asks a seventeen-year-old high school senior. "I mean, I've been in school like my whole life; I want to do something else for a while. Like travel or maybe, you know, get a job in another country. I mean, yeah, I want to go to college, I do. I know I have to. But, geez, I got my whole life ahead of me. So what if I go to college next year, or even five years from now. Like, you know, I mean, what's the hurry?"

If the economy that supported your parents into the middle class and above no longer holds out the promise of a decent job at a living wage, let alone one that will provide their level of affluence and a home of your own, why not retain your identification with the youth culture as long as you can?<sup>3</sup>

"I know you think I'm supposed to be a serious adult now that I've graduated from college, but that's only because you're not the one looking for a job," remarks an unemployed twenty-two-year-old. "You know, you do everything you're supposed to do, I mean, like you go to college and get decent grades. Then you get out and there's shit jobs waiting for you. So you live with your parents and wait for something to break, and, you know, hang out with the guys just like before. My parents keep nagging me to grow up, but

I don't know, I mean, I don't see a lot of advantage in being an adult."

If working for the rest of your life means doing the same thing for sixty years, maybe beginning later is a better idea anyway.

"Hey, I look at my dad; he's like fifty-seven years old and he's been working at the same job for *thirty-three years* [emphasis his], and he'll be doing it until he dies," says an eighteen-year-old recent high-school graduate who has been arguing with his parents about his plans for the future. "So what's the hurry about going to college and getting a job? I mean, for what? So I can do the same thing for fifty years?"

"What's the hurry?" — words that run like a refrain through my conversations with young people. Their parents, having themselves broken through the norms of their time and knowing the gains, the losses, and the unpredictability of life, are ambivalent. They have some sympathy with their children's view, even agree in some ways and encourage it, but they worry about pushing the boundaries too far, fearful of roads not taken and opportunities missed. So they push the children along, not exactly to stay in the traditional pattern of the life course, but not getting too far off it either: Get educated first, then go off and do what you want. Don't take the first job that comes along, but you have to start somewhere. Don't get married too young, but what are you waiting for? Don't rush to have children, but remember the clock is ticking. But their children, coming of age in a world where life seems to stretch into eternity, can only ask, "What's the hurry?"

As the years that define adolescence multiply, ideas about adulthood change as well. Until recently, marriage was the entry point into adulthood, a milestone people sought. That's no longer so. When people live to eighty and beyond, definitions of adulthood become more fluid, and choices that were unavailable, even unthinkable before, now lie before them.

There's no longer any social necessity for people to marry in

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their teens to ensure that they'll live long enough to launch the next generation. Nor is there any psychological imperative to rush into marriage when the years extend so far ahead and when, at the same time, the privileges of adulthood that once went with marriage alone are now readily available to singles as well.

"Sure, I want to get married and have kids one day, but there's no rush," explains an attractive twenty-four-year-old woman who works as a hostess in an upscale restaurant. "I mean, I've got this job I like, I've got friends and a boyfriend. I don't want a husband now. I mean, what I want right now is a little more money in my paycheck, and I'll get that soon. I'm after the assistant manager's job, and I think I'll get it. I'm just not ready to give all this up to become a wife and mother."

In the past, people married, bore children, and came to midlife at roughly the same age and stage, which made the markers of middle age easy to define. But no more. Take age, for example. When I wrote about midlife women in the late 1970s, the lower end of the age range was thirty-five, the upper end fifty-four.<sup>4</sup> Now thirty-five seems much too young to define the beginning of middle age and sixty-five has barely seen the end of it.

We can't easily define midlife by life stage anymore either. Not when one forty-five-year-old woman is inching toward grandmotherhood, while her next-door neighbor is clutching her pregnant belly as she chases after her two-year-old. Or when one fifty-five-year-old man is coaching his seven-year-old's soccer team, while the guy who works at the next desk is thinking about retirement now that he's just seen his last child leave home.

Such variations leave the experts scratching their heads about where to set the boundaries of middle age. In the real world, it makes no difference what they decide; we know it when we see it. Or perhaps I should say feel it.

In a recent *New York Times* article titled "Fatherhood, I Now Learn, Is a Young Man's Game," a forty-six-year-old first-time fa-

ther writes: "Already I was feeling pretty creaky, the consequence of a nasty basketball habit I couldn't kick. Ankle sprains, back spasms and, finally, the mother of all sports injuries, a torn anterior cruciate ligament. . . . Will I have the energy to be an older father? The patience? The knees?" he asks.

He found out just how hard it would be on his new family's first day home from the hospital: "I bent over to take an ice tray from the freezer, when, wham! Someone kicked a dagger-toed boot into my lower back. I went down, ice trays flying. These were the same back spasms that felled me on the basketball court a year ago. I couldn't get up, couldn't even sit up."<sup>5</sup>

Most people probably aren't quite so "creaky" at forty-six, but the body sends its messages in other ways as well. A couple of weeks ago a fifty-five-year-old friend who recently left a job as a corporate executive for one that doesn't require the long hours and, in his words, the "brain strain," called to complain about the change.

"Why did you leave your other job?" I asked.

"I've thought a lot about that," he replied, "and I think it was more than I wanted to do. I don't have the same manic drive I used to have."

"Do you think that has something to do with moving along in your fifties?"

"No," he said, a bit too quickly. A moment of silence, then, as if he had just heard his words, "Well, I don't know. Now you're asking me to think about it on another level. I'm just saying what comes immediately to mind, and that's that I tire more easily."

"And you don't think that has to do with your age?"

"Yeah, well, I guess now that you push me on it. It's like you lose some resiliency and don't bounce back like you used to. You can't concentrate as deeply for so long, so the work feels harder. I'd get tired before, but it was different. Now there's a kind of ex-



haustion that leaks into other parts of my life and that made it untenable to continue to do that kind of work."

It's a conversation I've had over the years with dozens of middle-aged women and men who were surprised to find themselves feeling the weight of their bodies in unaccustomed ways. Suddenly it seems, the body sags, the waist thickens, flesh droops, bulges appear where they never existed before, memory slips, something hurts today that wasn't a problem yesterday.

They talk about it, agonize about it, laugh about it as they try to find ways to accept the inevitability of their own decline. But the sadness is there, lurking beneath the surface of daily life as surely as tomorrow comes. "I'm finding that middle age isn't so easy to come to terms with, either," writes a fifty-year-old friend. "Fading beauty. Achy joints. And I gather that it's not going to get better as things go on."

I was having lunch a few days ago with a fifty-four-year-old colleague when she was visited by one of those middle-age moments of awareness. We were speaking of books we'd read, and I recommended one I'd just finished. "My memory is terrible these days," she said, searching in her purse for a pen and notepad. "I don't even try to remember anymore; I just write everything down."

"How long has that been going on?" I asked.

Without a moment's hesitation, she replied, "I don't remember."

Her words stopped us both in midbreath and a split-second look of sadness crossed her face before we burst out laughing at the absurdity of life and what it visits on us.

Whatever our capacity for denial, however hard we work to retain at least the illusion of youth, by the time we reach those middle years, we know somewhere inside that we have come to that turning that signals its loss. And we know also, perhaps

for the first time, the inevitability of our mortality. Physically we can't easily deny the signals of aging our body sends; psychologically we wrestle with the conflicts of this oddly contradictory period in our lives. Reflecting on his awakening sense of life's limits, a fifty-eight-year-old friend writes, "The moments are neither infinite nor finite—and we find ourselves suspended somewhere between the midst and the mist, seeking the sun, but aware of the fog, not counting the days, but measuring the seasons."

This is the paradox of middle age. It is both the high noon of life, the time when we stand at the pinnacle, while our very position there forces us into facing the reality of the losses to come. It's a time when doors both open and close, when everything seems possible and nothing does; a time when we take pleasure in knowing we're at the top of our game, while confronting the painful realization that it's downhill from there. It's a time of reckoning, of celebration as we consolidate life's gains, and torment as we confront our losses, a time of growth and decline, of a renewed search for meaning, both personal and existential, a time of endings and beginnings that's a confusing blend of hope and sorrow.