

THE SADNESS THAT STAYS

By Michael Ventura

April 16, 2014

“Can Google Solve Death?” *Time* ran that headline on its cover last September. They call it “radical life extension”: engineering biology so as to live much, much longer. My personal response is “No, thank you,” and my hunch is that the longer you extend longevity, the less you’ll like what you find – but let’s give a cheer of “Good luck!” anyway, because the more successful they are the more they’ll need the luck.

Others strive to link the human body to computers and robotics, as though we’re not monstrous enough as mere mammals. (Not surprisingly, there is abundant money to be made in increasing our capacity for monstrosity.)

As a Frankenstein myself, I can neither complain nor claim moral superiority. Science, in a sense, made me. Without medical advances spurred by World War II, my mother and I would not have survived my birth; or I would have been killed by those three bouts of pneumonia in my third and fourth years; or by that burst appendix at age five. Without science, I couldn’t see to drive. Without science (and insurance), I’d lack most of my teeth. Not to mention the blood pressure pills that keep my head from bursting. And that cream for the crabs.

Infirmity edges up on you like a high tide coming in, the kind of tide that drives you back against the cliff until there’s no beach left. To be spared physical indignities – who wouldn’t want that? But to “solve” death? To imagine a life in which death plays little part? To live without that great mystery staring at you, and waiting for you? Again, it’s only a personal preference, but: No, thank you.

What the radical life-extenders don’t grasp is that even if you quote-unquote solve death, and even if you extend the healthy lifespan by a century or two, you have not solved or even addressed the core experience of aging. Physically, you may not look and feel older, but you’ll be older.

You will always be a person of the era in which you grew and matured. Your era will mark you throughout your life, however long you live. Nothing can change that.

Artists know this very well, for it is as Yukio Mishima wrote: “Each period has its own style, and no artist living in a particular era can completely transcend that era’s style, whatever his individual outlook.”

It’s more obvious with artists, but it goes for everyone.

For instance, one may take for granted an element as basic as rhythm – by which I mean the rhythm of a society’s 24-hour day, the rhythm of a society’s year. During the last century in the United States, those rhythms have changed drastically almost by the decade, and to master the rhythms of the years in which you mature may leave you with a permanent sense of disorientation for what comes next – and something always comes next.

Some changes are very specific: To be a teenage American boy between 1940 and 1973 meant that, no matter what your station in life, you were likely to be drafted into the armed forces sometime between your 18th and 24th birthdays. Living with that hanging over your head breeds attitudes of all kinds, for better and worse – and those attitudes have become increasingly absent since 1973, for better and worse.

If I live another hundred years, I'll still be shaped by having to choose between loyalty to my government and loyalty to my morality. That sort of mark doesn't go away. Boys born after 1973 don't carry that mark.

Styles of speech, styles of thought, styles of manners, and styles of values (for values, too, go in and out of style) – the era in which you mature marks you. In my observation, that era usually extends to about age 40-45.

By age 47 you may be in your prime, but you're probably also in a rather set state and don't venture much beyond your self-made and/or imposed boundaries – so you can't readily learn that things you take for granted have already changed. The world you call "the world" isn't the world anymore.

(This is why politicians make such gruesomely off-the-mark decisions.)

Sometime in your 50s, something else happens – a process that can be debilitating because maybe you don't quite know it's happening, since it happens largely in your unconscious.

Put simply: The world around you is no longer the world inside you.

By 45 or so, your psyche, with no conscious effort from you, has developed an incredibly detailed holographic map of the world – of life. That map has been drawn and revised over the years by your upbringing, your education, your experiences, your beliefs, your vices, your illusions, your lights and your shadows. That map has served well enough for you to survive. And that map, once it has set in for a while, is virtually impervious to change. It believes itself.

By 60 or so, the world has changed so much that your inner map can't be depended upon. A profoundly disorienting event. Hard to get used to.

You're stuck with your inner map, but it's almost impossible to alter.

The only solution: Discipline yourself to keep your eyes and ears open and respond to the world that is, not the world you "see" on your map.

But most people choose another way and don't even know they're choosing: They confine their lives – and their opinions – to the limits of their map. That can pretty much work, if you're affluent enough. Life gets thinner, or drier, or less resonant, but it's still life, still familiar – and familiarity is as important to old people as it is to small children. But this approach eventually makes you feel useless as well as old.

(As for the word "old": 60 is not the new 40. It's really not. If Google and the robot-makers succeed, 160 won't be the new 40 either. The body is far easier to change than the psyche. Hey: We don't even have a firm concept of what the psyche is. Put colloquially, "We just know we got one." And it's unpredictable as hell – so much so, that in the Bible it's often called Satan.)

It becomes an enormous and baffling psychological environment:

The world inside you is no longer the world around you.

That makes for a sadness. A sadness that stays.

Americans have a damnable time with sadness. Along comes a sadness and we take a pill, take another pill, try a new therapist, eat less (or more), drink more (or less), take a vacation, take another vacation, work out more (or less), retire, un-retire, get a pet, or, if all else fails, redecorate.

But there's shit that's just sad. The era that shaped you, the era in which you felt more at home than you ever realized – watching it literally disappear into nothing – that's sad.

The passing of an era is a poignant thing. A large experience. And it doesn't end. It stays poignant and large. To accept that is to accept your place in the procession.

"What do we *do* with that?" asks the annoying American.

Doing isn't everything. Often, doing isn't even doing. It's make-work. To fill the silence one fears.

(Even if Google solves death, it won't solve that silence.)

The sadness of aging, the sadness that stays, doesn't have to take you over but it isn't going away. It can make you bitter if you let it. Make you pathetic if you let it. Make you delusional. (When someone tells me, "68 is not really old," I know I'm listening to an at least mildly delusional person.)

The sadness that stays – I know no way for myself but to make a friend of it. ("Good morning, blues, pull up a chair.") I am learning, slowly and at cost, to value this particular sadness, this large experience, as a sort of being who has something to teach me. I'm learning to listen for its lessons. (There, that's something to do.)

I've learned so far that these lessons are delivered by unexpected messengers at odd times of the day. Some are fun and some are hard and they're not meant to solve anything.

Copyright © Michael Ventura. All rights reserved.