

KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

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The Secret of Eternal Youth

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Old age is a philosophical problem, not a physical one. All of us are doomed to die, and we are not sure when. The body may slow, and mechanical systems may begin to fail, but that's no excuse not to make the most of what time you have left.

What makes a person "old" is their attitude toward life. We know that old people are set in their ways. They do the same things the same way, day after day, year after year, and although they may complain about their lot in life, they are unwilling to change.

If you offer them ideas for change, they respond with a million excuses which usually go like this: "I can't do X because of Y, and Y is non-negotiable." What makes a person old is the accumulation of all those non-negotiables.

This has nothing to do with chronology. There are old, decrepit people in their 20s and young, productive ones in their 70s. The difference is the weight of obligation they have accumulated around them, inhibiting youthful change and adaptation.

When a young person dreams of going overseas, he just puts on a backpack and goes. Whatever obstacles he encounters, he finds a clever way around them. An old person may dream the same dreams but he doesn't act on them, being weighed down by commitments both real and imaginary. He'll say, "I want to visit Europe, but I don't want to do it until I can fly First Class." Hence, he never goes.

Barring dementia, there is no neurological reason why personal growth can't continue for a lifetime. Apart from extreme physical activities, a 70-year-old can learn anything a 20-year-old can. A few neurons may have been lost along the way, but this is made up for by greater worldly experience and cognitive efficiency, which should allow the 70-

year-old to cut more quickly to what is most important.

The problem is that most chronologically old people don't want to change. They can't tolerate true growth because it would disrupt their prior investments.

These investments can be external contracts, like mortgages and marriages, or they can be emotionally invested philosophical assumptions. If someone has built his life on one theory ("Money is the most important thing."), he isn't likely to say, "Oops, I was wrong," and switch to a contrary idea. To avoid the perceived loss of his past investments, he will hold onto his original theory long after it has lost its practical value.

The young person has fewer prior investments, so he can move in any direction. He isn't beholden to a theory, so he can choose the one that works best at the moment. When new opportunities arise, he can jump into them quickly, then withdraw when they stop being productive.

What seduces the typical young adult is the delusion he has found his one true path and doesn't need any other. That's when he starts signing unnecessary contracts; the obligations start accreting around him, and in no time he's frozen in amber and gets "old."

It is a given that you have limited time on Earth. Right now, we're looking at about 100 years tops, probably a lot less. Chronologically young people tend to blow it off and say, "I have plenty of time, so there's no need to get serious now," while chronologically old ones say, "It's already too late. You can't teach an old dog new tricks." Both are wrong! Each of those years has the same value, and you can't afford to waste it.

The typical "retired" person squanders his remaining days because his can't-do-X-because-of-Y conundrums get in the way of more productive uses. He blows away his hours playing bingo,

fishing or doing crossword puzzles because anything else he tries runs into a wall of anxiety. Acceptance of the new requires abandonment of the old, which is usually distressing.

He rationalizes: "I deserve to waste time because I've worked hard all my life and need a break." It's old-age narcissism! There is no excuse for retirement—or at least retirement from meaningful missions. It is cowardice to think you can't change or that you can't be productive right up until the day your brain gives out. If you are not productive, it is because you choose not to be, because you can't bear the grief of abandoning an old path for a new one.

To remain young and flexible, you have to shed obligations at a greater rate than you are taking them on. For example, if a pet dies, you might consider *not getting another*. This sort of easy withdrawal opportunity happens all the time, but most people don't use it. One obligation ends; they are free at last, and they immediately replace it!

If all else fails, you can fake your own death! Before you dismiss this option, think it through. You are going to die anyway, right? Then all of your obligations are going to have to get along without you. Rather than letting death call the shots on its own unpredictable schedule, why can't you arrange to close your obligations in your own time and your own orderly manner? If you "die" early, at least in some conceptual way, then you are free to start life over with a fresh slate, as a young person ready to move in any direction.

To remain young, you have to see that all those non-negotiables are in fact negotiable. Death, after all, is going to wipe them out for you, so why not take the initiative and do it first?

—G.C.

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