

What's Wrong with Being Seventy?

INTRODUCTION: *George Bernard Shaw was asked in his elder years what he thought about becoming old and he is reputed to have replied, that it's not too bad when you consider "the alternative." Of course the alternative to becoming old is to die. Life is an engaging tragedy. Youth lures us into a sense of continuum; we avoid the thought of becoming old and dieing though we read about it constantly. We ignore the death of others until some one close to us dies and then we contemplate our own finite existence. This paper is a personal revelation of becoming old. I considered researching aging, and have done some of that, but I concluded that what I should contribute is not an overview of research, but the personal experiences of a technical writer who became old.*

LIFE IS AN ENGAGING TRAGEDY. When I was five years old, my father died, and I came to realize that I would never see him again in this life. Mine was a different experience than most readers and it gave me a sense of the terminal nature of life early on. Certainly life is engaging. As a child we learn that tomorrow follows today. We have expectations that engage us; lunch will be soon, we'll visit the zoo tomorrow, and kindergarten will be followed by first grade. And so it goes, but always knowing that life is a tragedy in the theatrical sense. The last act will end in death. You'll know that one day you'll no longer work, you will no longer climb high on a ladder, that you'll welcome your children carrying your luggage—the same children you once carried on your back.

AN EARLY IRREVERSIBLE TRAGEDY occurred while I was in high school. I broke an incisor playing football. Thirty years later, my teenage daughter broke an incisor on a skateboard and I found that in consoling her, I was also explaining the terminal nature of our lives.

ABOUT AGE FORTY, I noticed difficulty reading, and was examined by an ophthalmologist who wisely told me that I was not loosing my sight, but rather that my eyes were normally aging that they would continue to age for some time. This was a great surprise to me; no one had prepared me for this. I guess I thought that the kids who wore glasses grew to the adults that wore glasses. I had not noticed that most middle-aged people use reading glasses.

Reading glasses as the name implies are not used when not reading, and I became a person who had to have shirts with a pocket for my glasses. Then there was the need for a 'spare pair' because you couldn't be without them. One year I attended an STC meeting in Toronto and arrived there more than a hundred miles from home without my reading glasses. I could drive quite well without glasses, but when I tried to find Ryerson Polytechnic on the map, I just couldn't read the street names.

BY AGE FIFTY, I had distant and reading glasses and this was a problem particularly in church; one pair for reading hymns, another for seeing the alter. Ben Franklin's invention of bifocals solved this and later continuously changing focal-length lenses ameliorated this problem. Better illumination also became necessary.

BY MID-FIFTIES, however well people care of their teeth, the years take their toll. The broken incisor of my teens had to be replaced with a bridge. Other bridges followed but learning to care for them was easy.

BY AGE SIXTY, stairs became an enemy. If I had to walk from the front of the first floor to back of the third, I would choose to divide the climbs with a second floor hallway walk. Then I started using the elevator for a single floor. At work I became aware that people looked upon me as old, so I made a point of walking briskly. One day at home, I found I could no longer climb as high as I needed on my extension ladder. My arms would not help me climb the upper rungs.

BY MID-SIXTIES, the years of building up plaque in my arteries nearly closed one that fed my heart, and angina sent me to the hospital for angioplasty. I had read about angioplasty in *Science* or *Science News* as a new method that might save lives. In just a few years this experimental procedure became standard. The year I had angioplasty, there were 1479 procedures done at the hospital where I was treated. Another nearby hospital had done nearly 500 more. Had this procedure not been available, I might have had bypass surgery or just spent my years doing little or nothing—having only enough energy to survive.

IN MY EARLY SEVENTIES, I retired after 51 years of professional work. Now I serve several volunteer organizations including STC. One significant challenge of not having an employer is getting computer support. Fortunately my wife provides much of the ‘tech support’ expertise I need, while the service contract on my laptop provides hardware help. Copying and file conversions are easily available at a price—usually a low price. This kind of help was previously available at my place of work.

THE END NOW APPROACHES. Being in my 70s I can only extrapolate the future. I keep in contact with STC members Helen Caird and Herb Michaelson who were once STC officers and now enjoy their retirements, but keep active. Certainly my future will have more limits than my present. As I have made compromises with many activities in the past, I expect to make compromises in the future but keeping active in multiple activities seems to keep people vital.

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