Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Poetics of Exacerbation

Sylvie · Wednesday, January 21st, 2015

A conversation with a friend last Thanksgiving brought up the subject of why we die or, to put it another way, why we must and should die. No, this is not an invocation to mass suicide. Before alarming anyone too much, let me explain. I was commenting on the fact that the world around me is growing increasingly less familiar and that I find myself more and more of a stranger *in* it and not *of* it. That, I believe, is why people die — and should — making way for younger generations.

Losing my job last June may have contributed to this radical point of view, though I probably needed to lose it. The job, that is. After all, and I say this with neither cynicism nor self-pity, one must make room for the young whose world this truly is. So I decided it also might be time to write the occasional column on what it's like to grow older. I would have called it *The View From…*, but Malcolm Cowley got there first with his delightful book, *The View from 80*. I chose a different title.

You will not find a litany of aches, pains or medications here. You will not read about senior moments, food restrictions, bodily functions or really awful sex jokes. I'm aiming for something else — the history and now-moribund tradition of respect for elders that includes some curiosity about the philosophies they may have developed simply by living so long.

It's a version of the *if-youth-knew-and-if-age-could* syndrome, about the things that separate generations — and sometimes bring them together — such as altered tastes, styles, perceptions, values, affectations, formulations and so on. This essay (and perhaps others to come) takes a long view of our world from the perspective of someone who's been engaged in it for longer than most of its current inhabitants.

Cowley's book was published in 1978. The world has not been idling in the 37 years since, starting with the biggest transformation of all: the tech revolution that tossed us into the Digital Age naked and utterly unprepared. It is still in its infancy and already it, more than anything else, has revolutionized everything.

Until now, I had rather indolently watched my world and life sail by, too busy living and largely enjoying it. Big events — love, marriage, children, divorce, deaths — came and went, carving their deep notches. I was lucky enough to find the love of my life. It changed drastically again when I lost him 40 years later. And it turned once more when I stopped working for wages last year.

Those casual six words, “when I stopped working for wages,” are inadequate to describe the fundamentals of that experience. When you’ve worked for a long time, enjoyed being productive, enjoyed the validation, the people you were being productive with and still feel that you have plenty to contribute, not working is something of a punishment. Like having both hands amputated.

There also is a peculiar assumption in the land that you should not work beyond some arbitrary milestone and that, if you *do*, you should be overflowing with gratitude and not necessarily be paid for the privilege. I’m not sure where that came from, although it certainly does help clear the decks for the young.

Conversely — and assuming you are economically, emotionally and philosophically able to see it that way — not working can be liberating. The deeper question then becomes: what have you been liberated *for*? What can you achieve, in the remaining years of a happy, healthy and useful life that might benefit some aspect of human existence while adding value to your own? No one has an answer to that question for the simple reason that it would vary with each individual. So it’s still, as it always was, all up to you.

This state of affairs goes back to how others perceive that thing called AGE. Not what you think. In an era infatuated with acronyms for reasons that elude me, AGE in my book stands for Advanced Generational Exacerbation.

In her interview with the director of the film *Mr. Turner* in this newsletter, Sophia Stein said: “When I think about my grandparents and their cadence, how they spoke, they’re of a different time…” Not only cadence, Sophia, but language itself. Today we speak an American that is filled with, to be kind, grammatical laxity and the invasion of a techno-*argot* that has given rise, among other things, to those ubiquitous — and frequently unexplained — acronyms mentioned above.

We know “old” is getting older all the time. Ninety is the new 80. Sixty is the new 50, etc. Yet something I had not noticed until recently is how, as we pile on the years, we proportionately become… invisible. This is not new. When I was younger, I viewed older people that way myself. Except in rare instances, I saw them, not unkindly, as a reassuring but peripheral presence in my life. Which they were. (But what, I ask you, in those heady, passionate, energetic, busy youthful days could be more important than *my* life?)

Now I realize that the “me” inside is the same today as it always was, just easier to ignore, because of that altered face in the mirror. Other things that change with time (aside from the face) include being less or more disturbed and distanced by “outside” things. Crowds for instance (louder, more unwashed and sheeplike than ever); stupidity (always abundant), bad behavior (always unacceptable) and repetitive music. Oy, repetitive music — much of it is raucous and louder than it needs to be, adding to the misery of trying to have a conversation in a restaurant, but it’s the insistent drumming of the beat that drills holes in your brain, as if today’s composers had all morphed into untalented disciples of Philip Glass.

Getting back to filling time with something significant (or perceived as significant), I thought, for about five minutes, of having a t-shirt made for myself that would read FOR RENT in bold letters. But… too public, too easily misinterpreted, possibly dangerous. My friend M and I talk and laugh a lot about this. We know we still have what it takes (read that any way you wish), but how do we get others to see it? No one, not even Cowley, has a satisfying solution for people like us, crammed

with well-honed instincts, useful knowledge, lots of leftover energy — and no place to put any of them.

Older generations are famous for grousing about adverse changes they think they see in the young. But they're wrong. I know because I worked with a good number of terrific young people and they are us. There's plenty of good mixed in with some bad — and it's not a question of good or bad so much as a question of different. It's evolution, stupid. Do I like what I see evolving? Mostly no. Does it matter what I like or don't like? Of course not. I've had my turn at bat. All I want is to reclaim some visibility because, hey, I'm still here.

So the idea is to play detective, have a little fun, spend some time perusing the social firmament and see if we, the legions of the exacerbated, can espouse the world's permutations, mock them, avoid them or simply make better sense of them. Not just for our generation, but also for the actively busy ones that will replace us — and in far greater numbers. Are their values really so *fundamentally* different from ours? I bet not, but let's find out.

Here are a few things to chew on:

Julie Kent, a celebrated ballerina with American Ballet Theatre, recently announced her intention to retire and was quoted as saying, "It used to be that people wanted to *do* something, now they want to *be* something. 'I want to be a principal,' instead of 'I want to dance.' But being a star and having a fulfilling career are not always the same thing."

In a recent column in *The New York Times*, political commentator David Brooks quoted part of a speech that civic leader, John Gardner, gave to the Stanford Alumni Association 61 years after he graduated from that college. "The things you learn in maturity," he said, "aren't simple things such as acquiring information and skills. You learn not to engage in self-destructive behavior. You learn not to burn up energy in anxiety. You discover how to manage your tensions. You learn that self-pity and resentment are among the most toxic of drugs. You find that the world loves talent but pays off on character. You come to understand that most people are neither for you nor against you; they are thinking about themselves. You learn that no matter how hard you try to please, some people in this world are not going to love you, a lesson that is at first troubling and then really quite relaxing."

Finally, I believe Dov Seidman, author of the book *How* and CEO of LRN, which advises global businesses on ethics and leadership, really hit the bull's eye when he told the *NY Times'* Tom Friedman: "The world is not just rapidly changing; it is being dramatically reshaped. It operates differently. It's not just interconnected; it's interdependent. More than ever before, we rise and fall together. *So few can now, so easily and so profoundly, affect so many so far away*. It's all happened faster than we've reshaped ourselves and developed the necessary norms, behaviors, laws and institutions to adapt… Now, we're not only getting X-ray vision into the behavior of others, we're getting fine-grained MRIs into the inner workings of palaces, boardrooms and organizations and into the mind-sets of those who lead them…"

The italics above are mine and you'll get no rebuttals from me. I would add that we've been getting plenty of X-ray vision into the behavior of terrorists recently and fine-grained MRIs into the minds of cartoonists too.

The subliminal message in all this is that, no, we are not delusional when we say that the world is changing, not us. But before we start popping champagne corks and congratulate ourselves on such

perspicacity, I'll offer a stinging warning from the wise mind of that iconoclastic philosopher, Eric Hoffer. "In times of change," he wrote, "learners inherit the Earth, while the learn*ed* find themselves equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists…"

Touchée. The cure? Adapt or perish, even if sooner or later the latter is going to win.

So as I was saying, we need to get out of the way so that the world can continue to change in whatever manner it chooses. Until then, let's keep searching and perusing and giggling and who knows what else as long as we're alive and present. Let's keep shaking up the discourse, pursuing the debate and who knows? Even strive for a seat among the learn*ers*.

Makes sense to me. And to you…?

All photos by the author.

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