

Cicero and the blessings of growing old

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On weekday afternoons during the 1970s, when the homework was done and the weather unaccommodating to outdoor play, I would sometimes tune in to *The Merv Griffin Show*. This hour-long talk show, which ran in syndication almost every year between 1965 and 1986, featured more than 25,000 guests, including actors, athletes, authors, comedians, singers, musicians, and even United States presidents.¹ But one of its most fascinating guests was a tall, lanky, long-haired scientist, Durk Pearson, who appeared on the show some 32 times, reportedly generating more fan mail than any other guest except the actress Elizabeth Taylor.²

Merv Griffin, clearly enchanted by this guest, would introduce Pearson as an alumnus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who had graduated at the top of his class with a triple major in physics, biology, and psychology, and then gone on to achieve the highest score on the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) for the year in which he took it.² I recall one episode when Pearson appeared alongside two-time Nobel laureate Linus Pauling, perhaps the greatest chemist of the 20th century, who shared Pearson's enthusiasm for high-dose vitamin C as a way to promote health and prolong life.

Pearson and his wife, Sandy Shaw, often appeared on *The Merv Griffin Show* in tandem. In 1982, the pair published a book entitled *Life extension: A practical scientific approach*, which became a number-one bestseller on the *New York Times* list, selling over two million copies.³ The authors argued that aging primarily

results from the production of free radicals in the body and that readers, by taking antioxidant supplements, could prevent such damage. The book featured long discussions of the wide range of nutritional supplements that Pearson and Shaw made available from their companies, along with photos of the trim authors striking bodybuilding poses.

In a 1992 film, *Never say die: The search for eternal youth*, Pearson outlined the "most important concept of aging" in these terms:

Aging is caused by mechanisms that scientific research can elucidate, and once we know how these mechanisms work and how it is possible to intervene in them, we can slow down aging and perhaps even reverse substantial amounts of aging damage.⁴

According to Shaw, "If we could actually keep up with the damage, we would be able to live indefinitely, which would mean until an accident, suicide, or murder would get us."⁴

Pearson and Shaw usually appeared clad in new-wave clothing, sporting long, wavy manes, but even by the 1970s, even more so by the 1980s or 1990s, it was apparent that they were aging—as judged, for example, by the increasingly wrinkled skin of their necks—and that they were doing so at about the same pace as others of their vintage. Despite Pearson and Shaw's faithfully gulping down the same supplements that their companies marketed to eager customers for decades, neither of the spouses seemed to have reversed or even delayed growing old themselves. Pearson, far from living well past the age of 100 in a vigorous state of health, died at the age of 82 in 2024, and Shaw died at the age of 79 in 2022.²

Of course, no one can know for certain that Pearson and Shaw's life-extension methods failed. Perhaps one or both spouses were destined to develop heart disease, cancer, stroke, or dementia much earlier in their lives and



Statue of ancient orator and philosopher Cicero from vestibule of Justice palace in Brussels. Jozef Sedmak, Alamy contributor

only avoided such fates through the techniques that they promoted in their book. Conversely, for all anyone can know, the spouses may have prolonged their lives beyond their eighties had they relied less on their nutritional supplements or other esoteric regimens, and focused more on eating well, exercising, and getting plenty of good sleep. What is certain is that neither spouse lived markedly longer than most other people of means.

Life-extension experts like Pearson and Shaw usually do shuffle off their mortal coils at relatively normal ages even though the enthusiasm for prolonging life persists unabated in their followers. The couple's successors have touted stem cells, gene therapy, tissue and organ

replacement, hormone injections, and a host of other techniques as a means of dramatically lengthening life, an ambition that has struck an especially resonate chord with some of the richest and most famous figures in the U.S. Peter Thiel, Sergei Brin, Jeff Bezos, and Sam Altman may reason that, having been so successful thus far, they have more success to continue to live for.⁵

Of course, efforts to prolong life are nothing new. The ancient Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh* is about a king who sets out to cheat death, and two of the founders of modern science, Rene Descartes and Francis Bacon, each sought a means of prolonging life—indeed, Bacon actually died of pneumonia contracted while he

performed experiments on preserving flesh.⁶ Today's would-be immortalists, who hope to extend their lives through cryonics (by being frozen and then reanimated once a cure is discovered for what ails them) or through transhumanism (by merging biology with information technology), come from a long tradition.

Yet cutting-edge science and technology are not humanity's sole recourses for coping with aging and death. Growing old need not be seen as a preventable disease, nor death as an unjust sentence. In reality, both are stages of life every bit as natural as infancy, childhood, adolescence, and middle age, and each is no less necessary to human existence than birth. Growing old may, in fact, open up opportunities for people to have a more fulfilling and productive existence than would be possible if they passed all their days in the so-called prime of life. Even dying may represent more a blessing than a bane.

Of the many works on aging, none surpasses in wisdom Marcus Tullius Cicero's 44 BCE "On old age" (*De senectute*).⁷ This fictional dialogue depicts an encounter between the 84-year-old Cato the Elder and two younger men, who express amazement at the ease with which Cato bears growing old. Through this work Cicero conveys a powerful message about aging and death—namely, that what matters most about human existence is not its overall length but the degree to which we can make each day count and live our lives to the fullest.

Suppose that Pearson and Shaw's successors fall as short as Juan Ponce de Leon in the quest for the Fountain of Youth and never discover a means of dramatically prolonging vigorous health and the human lifespan. Suppose that all the humans now in existence, like all the humans in the generations that preceded them, must content themselves with a natural limit of at most 125 years, an age that no human being has ever been documented to have exceeded. Suppose further that many of the humans now in existence continue to die in their 70s, 80s, and 90s without a realistic prospect of even reaching the century mark. Is this prospect a counsel of despair? Cicero thinks not.

Cicero opens "On old age" by reporting that his writing of the treatise has "brushed away all the vexations of old age," making it "even easy and agreeable."⁷ He suggests, in other words, that doing philosophy—in this case, by thinking through what it means to grow old—not only clarifies concepts but also changes perceptions and feelings. The aging that many people bemoan and

rebel against Cicero comes to accept with equanimity, not merely because he is powerless to oppose its advance but because aging itself, properly understood, offers advantages to those who can welcome and savor it after seeing it for what it really is.

The young men ask Cato how he can refrain from cursing his advancing years. Why would he not lament the decline of youthful vigor, like they do, or not devoutly wish to be restored to an age as youthful as theirs? The older man responds by reminding his interlocutors that the alternative to growing old is their dying young and little to find fault with by comparison. More at stake than people's age, Cato says, is how foolish or wise they are. If people are foolish, every age will be a burden to them, but if people are wise, they will make the most of whichever stage of life they happen to inhabit.

Cato goes on to enumerate and examine four reasons why people tend to regard old age as wretched. The first is because old age calls people away from the management of their affairs, the second and third because it impairs their bodily vigor and deprives them of considerable sensual gratification, and the fourth because it brings them to the verge of death. Such consequences, in the eyes of the young men, constitute adequate grounds for wishing above all else to be spared the ravages of aging. Presumably, these young men would have seized on the advice of life-extension gurus like Pearson or Shaw had they enjoyed the opportunity to do so.⁷

Cato, however, sees matters quite differently. As to the management of affairs, he values activities that require strength of mind over strength of body. The young, for example, may be better equipped than the old to take up arms, but the old are typically those best suited to assume command. In fact, the more seasoned a person is, the more likely that person is to offer the wise counsel necessary to avoid a battle in the first place. And while people may be more capable in their youth of climbing up a ship's masts and running to-and-fro on its gangway, it is usually only once they are older that they ought to hold the helm. Running, leaping, and wielding the sword and spear may be important, but they are much less so than reason, experience, and judgment. "Great things are accomplished," Cato declares, "not by strength, or swiftness, or suppleness of body, but by counsel, influence, [and] deliberate opinion, of which old age is not wont to be bereft."⁷ Rashness, he claims, belongs to youth, whereas prudence is a mark of ripe maturity. In general, people can better discern what is truly at stake

in a situation and best determine how to proceed when they are older.

To be sure, Cato acknowledges that some people lose their memory and lapse into senility as they age, seemingly no longer being of much use to themselves or others. But many of those who remain engaged as they grow older, whether through work or private pursuits, not only retain but augment their mental faculties. Cato gives as an example the greatest of the Greek tragedians, Sophocles. Sophocles's sons suspected him of becoming mentally incompetent after he started neglecting his property in old age. Yet Sophocles proved himself far more than competent to his judges by reciting the play that he had just written, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and asking them whether it could flow from a failed intellect.⁷

The mere fact that older people lose interest in some of the ambitions that preoccupied them in their youth—wealth, power, and fame—in no way proves they have lost their way. In fact, they may have discovered other ambitions besides the heaping up of worldly goods to be more worthwhile, such as the enrichment of the lives of other people, including others yet to be born. Cato, citing an unnamed poet, remarks, “He plants trees that will bear fruit when he shall be no more,”⁷ a sentiment so full of wisdom that both John Adams and his son, John Quincy Adams, cherished it.⁸

As to the charge that aging entails the decline of youthful strength, Cato reports that he no more desires the strength of his youth as he gets older than he desires the strength of a bull or an elephant. What youthful arms and lungs can do, he says, pales in comparison to what wise counsel can do by helping the less experienced become better human beings. Moreover, he says, the failure of strength in older people is often due to the vices of youth—immoderation, dissipation, and lack of discipline—rather than to any infirmity of old age necessarily. There is no one to whom the virtuous Cato would deny a meeting merely because of age.

To exemplify the preferability of wisdom over strength, Cato points to Nestor, the wise counselor of the Greeks at Troy, as depicted in Homer's *Iliad*. Cato avers that he could have brought the Trojan war to a conclusion far sooner with ten Nestors than with ten Ajaxes, the Greeks' most powerful warrior. Likewise, Cato points to the legendary athlete Milo, who was said to have walked the full length of the Olympian race grounds with a living ox on his shoulders. Cato asks his young auditors how much better it would be to possess the strength of

mind of a Pythagoras than to possess even Milo's physical strength. He advises the men to make use of their physical power while they still have it without supposing it superior to other forms of strength.⁷

The key to life, according to Cato, is to recognize and savor the blessings of each stage. In youth, that blessing is fickleness, the desire to try everything. In early adulthood, it is a sanguine temper, making all possibilities seem agreeable. In riper years, it is soberness, the ability to see reality for what it is. And in old age, it is maturity, the capacity to value everything for what it is truly worth. All of these stages, he says, are in harmony with nature, and the mission throughout each is to respect it as a fitting part of life, as a gift not to be refused but welcomed and even treasured.

As to the charge that age deprives people of sensual gratification, Cato sees that development largely as a boon. How much wrongdoing and suffering, he asks, can be laid at the doorstep of sensual temptations? The desire to satisfy pleasurable impulses can lead people to recklessness, including crimes against their neighbors and country. Those filled with lust have so much difficulty restraining themselves that they often end up suffering as much as anyone else for the indiscretions to which it leads them. Caught up in such passions, they find it all but impossible to think—much less act—properly.

Over time, Cato suggests, it becomes easier for people to focus on what is good and what duty calls them to do, as opposed to what will offer them the greatest prospect for sensual pleasure. Beyond sensual pleasure—sumptuous feasts, well-drained cups, and attractive bodies luring people into temptation—lies what is truly beautiful and excellent, and it is to these higher goods that aging assists people in devoting themselves. Sensual pleasure not only leaves those who indulge hung over, bloated and dull, and burdened with the guilt of a betrayer, but also makes them by necessity selfish, providing a means of gratifying the self and, as such, putting the self before the larger whole of which it is a part.

Suppose people find themselves at some kind of feast or celebration. What, Cato asks, are the greatest pleasures available to them? It turns out that those would not be the sensual pleasures of eating, drinking, and caressing, but rather the higher pleasures of conversation, fellowship, and friendship. Advancing age enables people to better appreciate these higher pleasures, such that the memory of a favorite meal owes more to those with whom they dine and the quality of conversation that

they enjoy than to what is on the menu. Most people, on sober reflection, will prefer the pleasures of mind and character to those of the body.

The fourth objection to aging—that it brings people nearer to death—Cato regards as a gross misunderstanding of the natural order of life. There is no living thing in existence that will not die, and instead of seeing that death as a curse, people should recognize it as the most fitting last chapter of a life well lived. For in dying, people will form a part of something larger, something existing long before they arrived that will persist long after they are gone. The universe does not revolve around any one individual, and when people's time comes, they should pass on the gift of life with acceptance and thanks, not bitter regret or anger.

After all, dying occurs at every stage of life—some people die in infancy, some in childhood, some in adolescence, and some in adulthood—and the truly regrettable outcome for anyone would not be to ripen into old age, but to die prematurely, deprived of the opportunity to run a life's full course. A wise and good person in old age has already obtained the long life that the young long for, and for the young to seek that long life without the old age it involves would be the height of ingratitude and self-contradiction—particularly since the young can only come to grasp what it means to make the most of each day fully in their later years.

In fact, as Cato argues, old age offers some of the greatest opportunities to express virtue. Through fearlessness of death, older people can express courage; by moderating the pleasures of the body, they can manifest temperance; and in focusing on giving and sharing, as opposed to extracting what they desire from others, they can embody generosity. In short, what matters most is not how long any given person lives but how well that person lives. Anyone might die at any moment, no matter the age, so meeting the end in ripe old age is far better than meeting it in youth, when still green and clinging tightly to the vine.

Those who aim to prolong their lives through science and technology should recognize that aging has more to do with character and wisdom than with telomeres and shifting hormonal balances. Their goal, rather than to avoid aging, should be to embrace it gracefully and well, showing themselves to be neither life's creator nor possessor but instead its grateful stewards, people prepared, when the time comes, to hand it over and pass it on. Those living less for themselves than for the others

who precede and come after them repay life's debt by meeting the end with poise.

As to those who, in Dylan Thomas' words, refuse to "go gentle into that good night" and instead "rage, rage against the dying of the light,"⁹ Cato and Cicero would, I believe, extend them compassion, not disdain and condemnation. Likewise, the titans of Wall Street and Silicon Valley, drawing liberally upon their fortunes in hopes of prolonging health and life. They, like Pearson and Shaw, cling so strongly to the vigor of youth as to cringe at the prospect of death; however, they, too, should receive compassion from the best among us. What these individuals have yet to learn about aging, they may still come to know through wise counsel.

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