

The Art of Aging Gracefully

Advice on the occasion of THE WEEKLY STANDARD's 1,000th issue

By P.J. O'ROURKE

Die young! The counsel is harsh, but the reasons are clear. Imagine portly, blustering, red-faced Romeo, burgher of a provincial Italian town, and frumpy, shrewish Juliet. "A dog, a rat, a mouse, a cat, to scratch a man to death!" versus "a braggart, a rogue, a villain, that fights by the book of arithmetic!" The two of them perpetuating the Montague-Capulet feud, which is now about who left his dirty doublet, hose, and codpiece on the bathroom floor.

King Philip of Macedon's boy would be known as Alexander the Not-So-Hotso if he'd lived past age 32 and actually tried to rule a geographical region so much in the news today.

The poor, dumb kid conquered the worst empire ever—Greece well past its Periclean 5th century B.C. sell-by date, stupid Turkey, snakepit Levant, horrid Egypt, awful Libya, vile Syria, fiendish Iran, the horror show that is Afghanistan, and some troublemaking denizens of the Punjab.

Or jump ahead 2,100 years to the same neck of the woods in 1824, and consider a Lord Byron who failed to expire of diarrhea and lived to see "The Glory That Was Greece, Part II"—a goat rodeo featuring corruption, revolt, assassination, and getting bitch-slapped by the Turks.

Greece ended up—when Byron would have been 45—with a sovereign bearing the singularly un-Hellenic name "Otto of Bavaria."

Meanwhile there's George Gordon, 6th Baron Byron and 1st "No-Account Count" of Missolonghi, getting fat and using his fading reputation as buttinski part-time

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national liberator to sponge off the locals. He's the Mikhail Gorbachev of Athens, except with more hair and a personal life too scandalous for a Nobel Peace Prize.

Do we really wish there were *more* Byron poems? "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage," "The Bride of Abydos," and "The Corsair" aren't enough for you? "Don Juan" was still unfinished after 17 big, honking cantos. Are you on pins and needles about how it ends?

In Byron's last bit of doggerel, "On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year," he's already complaining about the need for fiber in his diet.

My days are in the yellow leaf;

The flowers and fruits of love are gone

And he's whining, in typical solipsistic retirement-home fashion, about his other aches and pains.

The worm, the canker, and the grief

Are mine alone!

Byron, like fellow Romantic Movement twerps Shelley and Keats, was a political crackpot. Bad ideological vintages can't be improved by aging, *pace* Bernie Sanders. Strident senility begins to spoil the humor of "Don Juan" in Canto VIII:

If I had not perceived that revolution

Alone can save the earth from hell's pollution.

Percy Bysshe Shelley also checked out on time, at 29. "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world," indeed. Passing bills against prosaic things like private property.

Shelley might have lived to be an all-too-well-known member of Parliament, filibustering for Lake District Home Rule by reciting his poetry until Queen Victoria's head exploded midst his "England in 1819" description of her grandpa, dad, and uncles, *An old, mad, blind, despis'd, and dying king, / Princes, the dregs of their dull race . . .*

A divider, not a uniter was our Percy Bysshe.

John Keats would have been an old pest too. As it was, he did enough damage. Myriads of young dolts in school are dosed with—

*Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*

What if you get a flat? Try changing a tire with truth. Try changing a tire with beauty. What *ye need to know* is where the spare is.

But it's not just budding lovers, world conquerors, poetic prodigies, and people who Feel the Bern who need to die young. Callow geniuses of every type owe it to the world to kick the bucket promptly. I'm talking to you, Mark Zuckerberg. Which dreadful thing comes after Facebook?

Even we of middling talents probably shouldn't hang around too long. Yes, we have insights and understandings to impart to our juniors and can show them how to change a tire. But we'll make our points with obscure, antique examples and references to dead white males.

What if Jack and Bobby hadn't been cut down in their prime? What if they had lived to fulfill their potential as career politicians the way their brother Ted did? We would have had Larry, Moe, and Curly Kennedy.

What if James Dean hadn't driven his Porsche 550 Spyder with such youthful abandon? Did you see Marlon Brando as Jor-El in *Superman*?

What if the Rolling Stones were still alive and touring—Mick Jagger looking like somebody's crazy great aunt and Keith Richards resembling Ovid's Cumaean Sibyl who asked Apollo for eternal life but forgot to ask him for eternal youth, except dressed like Johnny Depp playing a pirate?

They are? They do?

"It's better to burn out than to fade away," as the Neil Young lyric has it. Although the same song—"My My, Hey Hey (Out of the Blue)"—also contains the lyric "This is the story of a Johnny Rotten."

To which *the* Johnny Rotten (real name John Lydon, age 60) responded, "Oh, hilarious." Because, as it happens, Johnny Rotten is *not* the dead Sex Pistol, that's Sid Vicious.

Obviously, it's too late for me and what's left of my generation to take my first and best advice about aging. But the point that Mick, Keith, Johnny Rotten (who still looks a fright and has been voted one of the "100 Greatest Britons"), and I are making is: If you must age, do not do it gracefully. Don't just get old, *get old and scary*.

DAVE CLEGG

"It's better to be feared than loved if you cannot be both," said the Roger Stone of his day. And at our age nobody's going to love Roger *or* me.

Lloyd Bentsen pulled the scary old man trick on Dan Quayle in the 1988 vice presidential debate. Dan defended himself against accusations of immaturity by noting that John F. Kennedy was his age in 1960. And Bentsen said, "I *knew* Jack Kennedy. . . . Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy."

Never mind that Bentsen was a hack and Quayle was full of principle and promise. Lloyd was old enough to get away with it. And Dan was too young to reply, "You bet I'm not! I don't cheat on my wife, lie about my health, or buy elections with my father's money."

I pull the same stunt on greenhorns claiming I'm to the right of Attila the Hun. I say, "I *interviewed* Attila the Hun. He was a social democrat who instituted large-scale looting, pillage, and rape entitlement programs."

Physiognomy helps make the brats tremble. Time supplies the human visage with a panoply of terrifying wrinkles, creases, furrows, wens, warts, and moles with a hair growing out of them. Provide your own gin blossoms. And maintain a stern facial expression. "Patience on a monument looking down on folly." If tempted to smile, mentally review the 2016 presidential primaries.

Speaking of which, making faces has worked wonders for Hillary Clinton, once a young lady of anodyne appearance and now doing such a good job of looking like the sum of all fears about Republicans that she'll probably be elected president.

I myself—with no small thanks to the prospect of a Clinton administration *redux*—have a grimace to make Medusa seem as if she just emerged from the beauty parlor with her snakes in a French twist. Stick me in one of Hillary's Susanna Beverly Hills pantsuit numbers and we'll put an end to this transgender fad.

Not that that is my particular sartorial strategy for scary. I favor pinstripes.

There's something about a man in a suit and tie that triggers visceral terror. Perhaps because the American people are now dressed as if they're 9-years-old-for-life. Adults go to work in playground shoes,



you'll-grow-into-them shorts, and shirts in the clashing plaid tartan of Clan MacColorblind.

When confronted with a man in a suit, instinct tells them they're in trouble. Plainclothes detective? Banker come to repossess the house? John Kasich still going door-to-door? Did the NSA intercept the email joke they forwarded? ("*Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump are running for president and you've only got one bullet . . .*") Secret Service? ("*Use it on yourself.*")

Bernie Sanders proves my point. He scares even me. He isn't dressed like a left-wing crank. He's dressed like a mortician. Maybe capitalism is dead.

A man in a suit wears the authority of adulthood. Adults are mythical creatures in modern life. We don't exist anymore. But like bedtime story hobgoblins we retain the power to cause nightmares.

I enhance the effect with tortoiseshell half-glasses. Stare coldly over the top of these and the surliest baristas, the most otiose DMV bureaucrats, the airline ticket counter representatives least inclined to upgrade me to business class suddenly feel . . . "Oh, no, Dad is home! God only knows how long he'll ground me for!" (And it doesn't hurt that God is always depicted as a guy who's at least my age.)

Looking old is effective. Acting old is more so. But it takes practice. I'm practicing being deaf. "What?" My goal is to take people who are saying dumb things and make them louder and dumber.

"I'm with Her!"

"What?"

"*I'm with Her!*"

"What?"

"I'M WITH HER!"

"Then what are you doing here?"

Besides, it's been 28 years since anyone told me anything I wanted to hear. And even then presidential candidate George H.W. Bush was telling me to read his lips.

What? is the fit response to all that's said by my doctor, lawyer, accountant, stockbroker, friends who have resigned themselves to voting for Donald Trump, importunate children, and spouse suggesting I consume more of Lord Byron's yellow leaves and fewer steaks and martinis.

Yet it is a subtle art to hear nothing that's said to me but still discern, from the country club bar, my college freshman daughter on the tennis courts 200 yards away whispering to her friend about where tonight's kegger will be held.

I practice being forgetful too. It has to be done exactly right. Forget where you parked your car or your own phone number (why the hell would I want to call myself?) or which day of the week it is, and your heirs and assigns will have you committed to the memory care

facility. But call the 2016 presidential hopefuls "Whatsheface," "Whosit," "Whachamacallit," and "that contract bridge dummy No Trumps or whatever his name is," and you'll be regarded as possessing the sagacious wisdom of a seasoned observer of the human comedy.

The sagacious wisdom of a seasoned observer (along with an inability to hear anyone who argues to the contrary) allows me to say what I damn well please.

I suppose this is what Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders think they're doing. Also the people who bog or slog or chirp or squeak or whatever it is they do on something they call "social media" and I call "What?"

My grandmother knew how to say what she damn well pleased, not that she ever would have said "damn." As a boy I asked her what the difference was between Democrats and Republicans. She said, "Democrats rent."

Once, when I remarked on slum conditions as we drove through a bad part of town, my grandmother said, "No one's ever so poor he can't pick up his yard."

And when I came home from college declaring that Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon were both fascist pigs and I was a Communist, she said—take heed, Bernie—"at least you're not a Democrat."

Going through family photographs I realize that my grandmother *cultivated* old age. By the time she was 40 her affect was Margaret Dumont opposite Groucho Marx in *A Night at the Opera*—if Groucho had been the straight man.

In 1966, when the Post Office issued its 6-cent FDR commemorative, my grandmother said, "My friends and I are having trouble using that new Roosevelt stamp."

"Why?" I asked.

"We keep spitting on the wrong side."

I'm following Grandmother's example, cultivating old age. Although—after trying on that pantsuit—I'm doing so in more of a Groucho way. I smoke cigars.

You'd be amazed how cigars drive away annoyances such as men in sandals, women who make their own jewelry, NPR tote-bag carriers, people who use the word "mindfulness," Prius drivers promoting social justice through bumper stickers, givers of TED Talks, listeners to TED Talks, and vegans who know whether produce is locally grown, organic, GMO-free, and fair-traded but who can't tell hay from straw.

I favor Havanas. But I'm told that a good cigar produces merely the odor of a smoldering compost heap. So I smoke cheap El Rope-O Grandes. They smell like I've set a wet dog on fire. A single deep exhalation works better than a trigger warning in a Berkeley gender studies class. The young and silly head for the hills (or the Hillary).

In the matter of aging gracefully, maybe I should have the grace to leave the world. But, failing that, I can make the world leave me. ♦