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How It Feels to be Ninety Years Old

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HOW IT FEELS TO BE NINETY YEARS OLD

That's a question that some of my friends would like for me to answer, especially some of the young boys and girls who are not more than 65 years old or something like that, "How does it feel to be ninety years old?" Well, I'll try to tell you a bit about ~~that~~ *it*.

And I'll have to say that ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ many ways it feels at ninety years very much as it felt at nineteen. I hope that I have more sense than I had at nineteen, and I am grateful that I have my senses "in a fair state of preservation", as my father used to say -- indeed I think that is rather too conservative a statement. Not that sight and hearing are as keen as they were seventy years ago, for instance; but what comes to me through sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch are much as they were as long ago as I can remember.

Pain, for instance, is much like it was "away back when". And the feel of a cool breeze on a hot day is the same as it was when I was a boy, even if it does not have as much hair to blow into disorder, if it was not in that condition before the breeze sprang up. The feel of a warm blanket on a cold night -- how can a man get into a warm bed and straighten out on a mattress that conforms to his anatomy with a "go to sleep" caress, without gratitude to God and a sigh ~~from the heart~~ and a prayer for the millions who never have a comfortable bed from the time they are born in poverty and squalor till the time they are laid away where their bodies could not feel pain if they were transfixed with a hundred daggers -- who started me on thoughts like these? I was trying to tell you how the sense of touch works much as it did when I was teaching my first country school more than a year before I was nineteen.

And roses and violets and lilacs -- and arbutus, that masterpiece of God's creation in the world of wild flowers -- and many other things in the realm of fragrance smell much as they did when I was nineteen, and long before that, and all the years since. (And the odor of mephitis mephitis -- it used to be mephitis mephitica before they changed the system of scientific nomenclature -- is just what it used to be, but what's the idea of bringing that up?) Whenever I see a lovely flower, I want to look at it with my nose as well as my eyes. A rose without fragrance is like a ~~momentum~~ beautiful woman without religion. I don't plant roses any more that do not have fragrance.

And roast beef tastes as good as it ever did. This year at a college dinner I ate a slice of it that tasted so good that I could remember only once in my life when I had had as good a piece of roast beef. Mince pie has the same tang that it had the first time I ever tasted it, and I think I like it rather better than I did then. There is nobody on earth that can make as good apple pie as Rebecca used to make, but good restaurant apple pie is as good as good restaurant pie ever was. And the same goes for more than forty kinds of fish that I have eaten -- don't you go to questioning that statement, for I've counted, and I find that I've caught more than forty kinds of fish, and have eaten more than fifty kinds, and if you want a list I can furnish it. My sense of taste is still keen.

And the song of the robin, the rose-breasted and the black-headed grosbeak, the cardinal, the song sparrow, the brown thrasher, and many other birds that I could name; the rich tones of

the organ, the versatile music of the piano, the sparkling accents of the violin -- how could my Quaker ancestors think that it was an instrument of the devil? --, the great orchestra, the band, the mighty chorus -- all these and many other forms of music are as delightful as they ever were. And I could include a mother's lullaby -- I ~~remember~~ do not get to hear that as often as I used to hear it -- and the tinkle of sleigh bells and of the brook that runs right past the door of El TeePee, my cottage at the coast, and the sighing of the wind in the trees, and the frightening roar of the thunder and the crash of the lightning, and the sob of the sea and the voice of love -- "Oh for the touch of a vanished ~~had~~, the sound of a voice that is still" -- I can't hear a watch tick as far from me as I used to hear it, but I am rich in the many sounds that flood God's world. (And why must I think of the sound of a sob or the groan of pain? How grateful we should be that there is promise of a land where "There shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain.")

I intended to save the best for the last, the sense of sight. I need spectacles for reading, and with my bifocals I can see distant things better than I can without them. But a lovely flower, a gorgeous sunset, a snow-capped mountain (wait a minute; I never saw a snow-capped mountain till I was past ~~thirty-five~~ ^{thirty-five}), a pretty girl, a beautiful woman, none of these ~~have lost their~~ ^{has lost its} charm for me. And the face of a tender mother is among the most beautiful things that God and love have ever combined to produce. And the smile of a loving wife is the most beautiful sight that this mundane world has for human eyes to see. Only the man who has had the blessed privilege of looking into the face of her who is more than all the rest of the world to him can even guess what it means when her dear face can be seen only in memory. That sweetest smile on earth that it was so long my privilege to see so many thousand times -- at nineteen I never had had such a delight which the sense of sight provided for much more than half a century.

Well, as I told you before, being ninety years old feels much like being nineteen, only much richer and fuller in its joys -- and sorrows.

But truth would compel the recognition and recording of the fact that in many ways being ninety years old feels very different from being nineteen. The difference is wide in the physical realm, the mental, the spiritual, the social, and so on.

In the physical, to start at the bottom -- well, make it literal and start with feet and legs. "The old gray mare ~~isn't~~ ain't what she used to be", and the same thing is true of the lower limbs -- it wasn't really nice to say legs when I was a boy, even when talking about men, and when talking about women, as men did in those days at times, if you were in polite society you did not admit in words that legs were concealed under those voluminous skirts that swept the ground -- let's not think about that. The sweepings were not attractive. Well, it was my legs that I started to mention. They used to take me up the stairs two or three steps at a time; now I step on each step twice, so that it can be sure that it has really been stepped on. I used to win the hundred yard dash with a good deal of regularity (and the fifty yard dash, and the twenty-five yard dash, best two in three), but now I don't dash, and I hope I may never need to do it. I used to do many kinds of jumps, more than a dozen (list furnished on request), but now I'd not jump if I sat on a tack or if lightning struck the house.

Let's not dwell long on the physical. I once took a ~~barrel~~ of salt off the dray and carried it across the wide walk to the store in Greilickville -- or was it on this side of that suburb in what was known earlier as Slabtown?; the other day I carried a 50-pound sack of potatoes to my car half a block away, and when I came back to the store I asked the wife of the proprietor of the store why a fifty pound sack of potatoes was so much heavier than it used to be, and she said it was the same weight that it had always been. I asked her why it seemed so much heavier, and she remarked with a very nice smile, "I guess we'd better not go into that." Many a time, as Shakespeare expresses it, I have "watched the horologue a double ~~MMMMMMMMMMMM~~ set" for "drink rocked not my cradle"; yes, I have worked the clock three times around, and once almost four times; but now if I've had only four hours of sleep the night before I can fall asleep at my typewriter without even waiting for a period. I used to be "the iron man"; now I don't work very hard physically, nor very long at a time.

But I'm losing interest. I could go on from my start with the deterioration of my nether supports -- I'd rather be lame at that end than the other -- and speak of various other parts of my physical organism, but what's the use? The machinery is considerably worn. As John Quincy Adams used to say when asked how he was, "I am all right; but the house I live in is not what it used to be, and some day I shall be moving out of it." (If I do not quote him verbatim, he will not hold it against me, I am sure. ~~I am sure~~ I have his idea clearly in mind.)

Mentally folks seems to think that I am clear in my thinking, and I am glad to agree with them. I can enjoy Browning's Prospice or Tennyson's In Memoriam or Fitz-Gerald's Rubaiyat or Milton's Paradise Lost or Shakespeare's Hamlet or Frost's Mending Wall or Robinson's Richard Corey or Lowell's Commemoration Ode or Lincoln's Gettysburg Speech or David's Shepherd Psalm or Plato's Apology or Hoover's God Bless You -- I can enjoy these and many other things as well as I ever did, and even more; and I am still sufficiently sane so that I can thoroughly detest such things as the alleged "poems" of Gertrude Stein, and Winter's Caliper by an unknown poetess -- and the more completely unknown the better. If there is sense in such pronouncements as "Nothing mumbles but bricks is miscellaneous" I never have had sense enough to see it. (Ouch! Who switched me on to this sidetrack?)

The one big difference between nineteen and ninety is that at nineteen the road that had been traveled was short, and the road ahead seemed long -- almost interminable; while now the road that has been traveled is long, and in the very nature of things there are not many more miles ahead.

Looking ahead, as one of advanced years must do, I wrote, or it seemed that it almost wrote itself,

THE LAST HOUR

 When the last hour has come and I lie waiting
 For that grim summons to the other world;
 When all earth's grieving, longing, loving, hating
 Into the past's abysses have been hurled;
 When all that I have known is fast receding
 And all I have believed is fading, too;
 When every hope for life has ceased its pleading
 And everything is done, and naught's to do;

When the last moment comes , and I am sinking
 Out of all life as I have known it here,
 May it be mine to meet my end unshrinking;
 Let me go out of life without a fear.
 What scenes I next shall see I do not know,
 But may I have a brave heart as I go.

And in another and simpler vein:

GOOD-NIGHT

When I was just a little boy, as came the close of day
 My mother'd tuck me in my bed -- you know a mother's way --
 And then she'd kiss my lips and brow, and softly she
 would say,

"Good-night, dear son, I'll see you in the morning."

The years passed on, long, crowded years. As closed
 one winter day
 I sat by Mother's bedside -- she could no longer stay.
 I stooped to kiss her whitening lips and heard her
 softly say,

"Good-night, dear son, I'll see you in the morning."

The deepening shades of evening will compass me some day.
 My dimming eyes will look into the future dark and gray.
 God grant that in that hour some loving heart to me may say,

"Good-night, good-night. I'll see you in the morning."

How blest I have been in having such a mother and such
 a wife as were mine. Browning, looking toward the end, wrote *as the*
conclusion to his immortal Prosopopeia!

I was ever a fighter -- so one fight more,
 The best and the last!
 I should hate that Death bandaged my eyes and forbore,
 And let me creep past.
 No! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers,
 The heroes of old,
 Bear the brunt, in a minute pay glad life's arrears
 Of pain, darkness and cold.
 For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
 The black minute's at end,
 And the element's rage, the fiend voices that rave
 Shall dwindle, shall blend,
 Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
 Then a light, then thy breast,
 Oh, thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
 And with God be the rest.

~~When I am gone I hope that those who have loved me beyond~~

all my deserving may think in the words of Thomas Gray,

No~~x~~ farther seek his merits to disclose,
 Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,
 (There they alike in trembling hope repose,
 The bosom of his Father and his God.)