



THE SYMPHONY OF A LIFETIME

Joseph Epstein

I have taken to saying that my wife and I are at the grandparent stage of life. I don't before now recall using the metaphor "stage" to describe any other segment or portion of my life. The notion of stages of life has been around for a long while, of course, and doesn't look to be going away.

The popular journalist Gail Sheehy wrote a book called *Passages*, but her passages are little different than stages. The psychoanalyst Erik Erikson was in his day best known for his "stages of development," in which human beings, properly developed, are able to grasp more and more complex realms of experience. In *On Death and Dying*, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross even spoke of the five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and resignation). Difficult, it seems, to get away from that metaphor of the stage.

"Yes," I say, "my wife and I are at the grandparent stage," and then pause and ask the person to whom I've just said it if he or she knows that the reason grandparents and grandchildren get on so

well is that they share a common enemy. All the world, like the man said, is a stage.

Infancy, childhood, youth, the long stretch of adulthood, ending (if one is lucky) with mild decrepitude and (if one is really lucky) easeful death—such are the traditional stages of life on which most of us would agree. Some people cut it a lot finer. For some, marrying is a major stage of life, with having children no less—perhaps more—major still. Some click off stages of their lives by decades: 30, 40, 50, each turning into a great psychodrama of life slipping past, usually too quickly. For some the death of one's parents marks a sobering stage of life; it puts one, after all, next in line for entrance into the room where someone awaits with a garrote, which Pascal famously describes as *la condition humaine*.

Everyone, surely, will have his or her own demarcations for important stages in his or her life. Some may seem quite trivial. Getting a driver's license at 15, the legal age in the Chicago in which I grew up, was a big item for me and my friends, for having the use of a father's car gave us freedom to explore the grand city outside our neighborhood. I grew up a frustrated athlete—frustrated, that is to say, by abilities that came nowhere near matching my fantasies of athletic glory, especially in basketball. In this connection I can recall, sometime in my early 30s, walking under a glass backboard and newly netted hoop, and not ever bothering to look up to imagine myself making some acrobatic lay-up. Ah, I thought, all basketball fantasies are officially gone, finished, kaput—I have entered a new stage of life.

A crucial element in this matter of stages of life can be how important the question of being, staying or at least seeming youthful is to a person. I was spared this by being born in 1937, a time when not staying young but growing up into adulthood as quickly as possible seemed the ideal. The English poet Philip Larkin, though older than I, captured this spirit nicely when he said he first had his doubts about Christianity when he read that in heaven one would return to the state of a child. This was not a good idea for him, who longed to be an adult with a lot of keys, long-play records, drinks and beautiful women to chase after.

Forever young

Staying young as a way of life kicked in in a serious way in the late 1960s, when, you will recall the cliché, no one over 30 was to be trusted. Many who grew up under this rigid requirement have stayed at the game of remaining young, some would say with all

too naturally diminishing returns: consider only all those men now in their 60s and beyond with their sad, dirty gray ponytails.

For those for whom youthfulness is all, perhaps there are only two stages to life: young and not young, with the latter being a kind of death unto itself. One thing for certain, in the consideration of stages, taking on biology is a no-win proposition. In a recent short story of mine called “The Love Song of A. Jerome Minkoff,” a man named Maury Gordon, who is 85, is told that he has pancreatic cancer: “‘When you get to my age,’ Maury said [to his doctor], ‘you’re just waiting to hear that your time is up. All this crap about 60 being the new 40, 70 being the new 50, well, I have some friends who’ve reached 90, and let me tell you, Doc, 90 looks to me like the new 112.’”

“Married, single,” an old joke goes, “neither is a solution.” I don’t happen to believe that, being happily married to a superior woman, but it does point up the paradox offered by the question of when one enters various of life’s stages. My generation, wishing to grow up quickly, tended to marry young and have children early. I had two sons by the time I was 25. Is it better to have children young, when one’s energy is greater but one’s attentions are often fixed on attempting to make good on one’s ambitions? Or is it better to have children when one is older, when one’s ambitions have tended to have had their run, but one’s energy is less, though one can pay proper attention to the chaotic miracle that is the early life of one’s children? Neither, once again, is a solution.

A solution implies a problem, and whether or not one has viewed one’s life as a problem will have much to do with how one views the stages of one’s life. Saddest of all—next, of course, only to early death—is to arrive at the close of one’s life and see all that has gone before as a series of wrong roads taken, opportunities missed, courage wanted. Shouldn’t have gone into this line of work . . . Shouldn’t have married so late . . . Shouldn’t of, shouldn’t of, shouldn’t of . . . In another short story of mine, this one called “The Philosopher and the Check-Out Girl,” the main character, a retired academic, claims to be suffering, fatally, from what he calls “a late-life crisis, the one that occurs when, in the face of approaching death, a person realizes that his regrets greatly outweigh his achievements and there isn’t enough time left to do anything about them.”

Luck

Luckiest among us are those who feel they’ve had a good run, and can look back and feel that even their mistakes made sense. I have

had serious setbacks and have known profound sadness, yet I hope that I do not sound nauseatingly smug when I say that I think of myself as such a lucky person. My personal regrets, such as they are, reside in the small-change department. I wish I had learned how to play piano, if only so that I could play for myself the enchanting melodies of Maurice Ravel. I wish I had learned ancient Greek, so that I could read many of the writers I love in their own language.

My life has never been about money-making, but I nonetheless wish I had been able to accumulate enough money early in life so as not to have to think about it, a condition I am clearly not likely to arrive at at this point. I even, first time round, married the wrong woman, yet this (one would think) grave mistake resulted in talented and thoughtful children and grandchildren.

Much of my good luck has had to do with when and where I was born. I have lived my life through decades of unexampled prosperity in the richest country in the world. Although I served two years in the Army, the year of my birth put me in the fortunate position of not being called up to fight in any wars: I was too young for Korea and too old for Vietnam. Any man—and now women, too—who fought in a war, who were actually fired upon, would have to count the experience as among the crucial stages in his life, as, surely, did those who fought in World War II or in Vietnam, and soon the same will be true of those who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I was also lucky going through my adolescence in the early years of the 1950s, when there were plenty of ways to get into trouble but at least the deadly alternative of drugs was mostly absent. Of all the stages of my life—and I've yet to figure out how many there have been apart from the conventional one I mentioned earlier—my four years in a public high school in Chicago have been the most unrelievedly happy ones. These were years in which I enjoyed neither athletic glory nor the least hint of academic distinction. I came to school each day not for learning but for laughter: riotous, raucous, unremitting laughter among friends. I still see some of these friends, and now, more than 50 years later, we continue to wring pleasure out of the old jokes, incidents, anecdotes of those charming days.

Once again the luck of history was on my side. Owing to the Depression, my generation had one of the lowest populations attending colleges, which took off the enormous—I would even say hideous—pressure that now haunts the young who want to get into the colleges of their choice. In my day, the University of Illinois had to take any student who graduated from a high school within

the state, even if he finished last in his class. It was, in effect and in fact, open enrollment. I finished just above the bottom quarter of my graduating class, went to Illinois, and after a year there transferred to the University of Chicago, then, unlike now, not so difficult to get into, though fairly tough to get out of. Luck of the draw.

Not all stages of life are marked by chronology, biology or culture. How one recounts the stages of one's life has a good deal to do with the time in which one was young, adult, old. Some generations, of course, have been marked by a single historical event: the Depression, World War II, the Sixties. Then there are the stages of one's career: an old joke invoked the five stages of Joseph Epstein (supply your own name here): 1. Who is Joseph Epstein? 2. This is a job, clearly, for Joseph Epstein. 3. We ought to get someone like Joseph Epstein for this job. 4. This job calls for a younger Joseph Epstein, and 5. Who is Joseph Epstein?

Politics can mark yet another set of stages in the lives of men and women who take them seriously. The standard cliché on this subject is that when young one is liberal-leftish, turning more conservative ("Mugged by reality," in Irving Kristol's famous phrase) with the passing years. But many people retain their youthful politics all their lives. For a notable example, William Hazlitt, the great English essayist, never gave up in his belief in the glories of the French Revolution and later in Napoleon, upon whom he wasted his later years writing a wretched book.

For some, politics are much more important than for others; for most of us, politics tend to take a diminishing importance the older we get. I feel this in my own life, quite content to assume that all politicians of both parties are frauds and swine, unless proven otherwise. For the old-line American radicals of the 1920s and '30s, key stages in their lives would include when they joined the American Communist Party and when they left it.

A fantasy life

From this rough sketch, one gets at least a glimpse of the complexity of the notion of stages in a person's life. One also gets a sense of the subtle tyranny of stage-thinking. Recall that still active cliché of masculine life, the midlife crisis. The way the midlife crisis is supposed to have worked is that a married man, sometime in his early 40s through late 40s, decides that the conventional (by which is generally meant middle-class) married life does not fulfill him; what does is a much younger woman than he (and his wife), preferably one seated in a newly purchased red convertible with him at the wheel. And so in a fine triumph of random desire, not to say

idiocy, over good sense, he gives up family and everything else he has worked for to begin this new fantasy life.

The problem with the cliché of the midlife crisis is that it apparently has had immense attraction, for to this day a disproportionately large number of American couples end their marriages when the man is in his early to mid-40s. Which is what I mean by the tyranny that thinking about our lives in stages can have upon us.

The midlife crisis, I'm pleased to report, seemed to float right by me. I hadn't the time, the money, the leisure or (sad truth to tell) the attractiveness to women to bring the operation off. I have even enjoyed going beyond midlife and understanding that I have passed the stage of being of sexual interest to anyone except my wife. I find myself from time to time, in fact, telling a young check-out clerk or saleswoman that she has beautiful eyes or lovely hands, and they seem to understand that I am not, in the phrase of the day, hitting on them but taking up the prerogative of an older gent to pay simple homage to female beauty.

A midlife crisis would not have done for me. I have never been one to believe he can make dramatic shifts in his own life, upsetting all the standard stages and plans. I have instead believed in living the prosaic life, going at things day by day, and hoping to evade such unexpected thunderbolts as serious illness, economic disaster and early death, my own or that of those dearest to me. Not everyone shares this general view. Although I was a wild young boy, somewhere along the way I chose to live the quiet life, and I have not regretted it.

Some years ago I read a brilliant essay called "Prosaics," by Gary Saul Morson, a teacher of Russian literature at Northwestern University, in which he showed how Tolstoy believed in the prosaic life and Dostoyevsky in the dramatic.

Things happen to Tolstoy's characters—they go to war, have vastly disruptive love affairs, suffer unexpected deaths—but they are most interesting in their ordinariness: a strong case in point is Natasha's family, the Rostovs, in *War and Peace*. Her brother and father and mother, with their rich but normal passions, appetites and family loves, are people who gain moral stature through an endless series of small acts.

In Dostoyevsky, on the other hand, nothing is ordinary: passions turn into obsessions; gambling addicts and epileptics are at the center of things; men are beating horses to death on the Nevsky Prospect; poverty has wrenched people's lives into little hells on earth. The question isn't really who—Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky—is the

greater novelist, for both are great, but which shows life as it is more truly is.

As Professor Morson puts it: “Dostoyevsky believed that lives are decided at critical moments, and he therefore described the world as driven by sudden eruptions from the unconscious. By contrast, Tolstoy insisted that although we may imagine our lives are decided at important and intense moments of choice, in fact our choices are shaped by the whole climate of our minds, which themselves result from countless small decisions at ordinary moments.” At some point in life, I think, one has to decide if one is, in one’s belief in the shape of his or her life, a Dostoyevskian or a Tolstoyian.

Final stage

In the end, of course, it is the final stage of life that is of the greatest interest. Learning to die well, it has been said many times, is the true point of philosophy. Yet what a blessing it is that we do not know the precise or even rough date of our death. It says a great deal about the paradox of life itself that this is no doubt the most important piece of information about our lives and yet we are probably better off without being in possession of it.

On this subject of the final stage of life, the philosopher George Santayana, who lived to the age of 89, thought it made good sense to assume, unless told otherwise by a physician, that one always had another 10 years to live. The wisest man I have known, Edward Shils, who died at 85, used to continue to buy kitchen gadgets and plateware and such things in his early 80s; it gave him, he once told me, “a sense of futurity,” the feeling that the game was not yet over, however actuarial thinking might insist otherwise.

The tough question is whether one is oneself in the final stage of his or her own life. I have just turned 73, and part of me would like to think that I have yet another stage to play through: older I indubitably am but surely not elderly. Yet lots of evidence suggests this might be wishful thinking. Henry James said that when he reached the age of 50, someone he knew died every week. I find the same is true for me at the age of 70: if it is not someone I know closely or even personally (the editor of a friend, for example, or the former wife of one’s publisher), the body count, as I read the morning New York Times’ obituary section, you might brutally say, piles up.

Then at a certain age—for me it kicked in around 60—one begins to notice the ages of the dead, and how many of the newly dead are

of one's own generation. Not always the best way, perhaps, to begin one's day, with this gentle reminder of one's own mortality, but once begun difficult to stop.

Santayana, who was very smart on the subject of the end of life, remarked that one of the reasons older people often grow grumpy about the world is that they, with the presentiment of their own death, can't see what good it can be without them in it. One hopes of course to fight off this grumpiness; one hopes not to purvey fantasies about the purity of life when one was young as opposed to life now with all its corruptions.

In the last stage of life, even with the cheeriest outlook, it isn't easy to keep thoughts of death at bay. Consider, though, the advice of the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270 B.C.), who lent his name to the school of Epicureanism but who was, in my reading of him, the world's first shrink. Epicureanism is generally understood to be about indulging fleshly pleasures, especially those of food and drink, but it is, I think, more correctly understood as the search for serenity.

Epicurus, who met with friends (disciples, really) in his garden in Athens, devised a program to rid the world of anxiety. His method, like most methods of personal reform, had set steps, in this case four such steps. Here they are:

Step One: Do not believe in God, or in the gods. They most likely do not exist, and even if they did, it is preposterous to believe that they could possibly care, that they are watching over you and keeping a strict accounting of your behavior.


Step Two: Don't worry about death. Death, be assured, is oblivion, a condition not different from your life before you were born: an utter blank. Forget about heaven, forget about hell; neither exists—after death there is only the Big O (oblivion) and the Big N (nullity), nothing, nada, zilch. Get your mind off it.

Step Three: Forget, as best you are able, about pain. Pain is either brief, and will therefore soon enough diminish and be gone; or, if it doesn't disappear, if it lingers and intensifies, death cannot be far away, and so your worries are over here, too, for death, as we know, also presents no problem, being nothing more than eternal dark, dreamless sleep.

Step Four: Do not waste your time attempting to acquire exactious luxuries, whose pleasures are sure to be incommensurate with the effort required to gain them. From this it follows that ambition generally—for things, money, fame, power—should also be fore-

sworn. The effort required to obtain them is too great; the game isn't worth the candle.

To summarize, then: forget about God, death, pain and acquisition, and your worries are over. There you have it, Epicurus' Four-Step Program to eliminate anxiety and attain serenity. I've not kitchen-tested it myself, but my guess is that, if one could bring it off, this program really would work.

But the real question is, even if it did work, would such utter detachment from life, from its large questions and daily dramas, constitute a life rich and complex enough to be worth living? Many people would say yes. I am myself not among them. 

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Joseph Epstein is formerly the editor of *The American Scholar*. He taught for 30 years in the English department of Northwestern University and has written more than 20 books on such subjects as snobbery, friendship, Alexis de Tocqueville and Fred Astaire. A new book of his short stories, *The Love Song of A. Jerome Minkoff*, will be published in spring 2010 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

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