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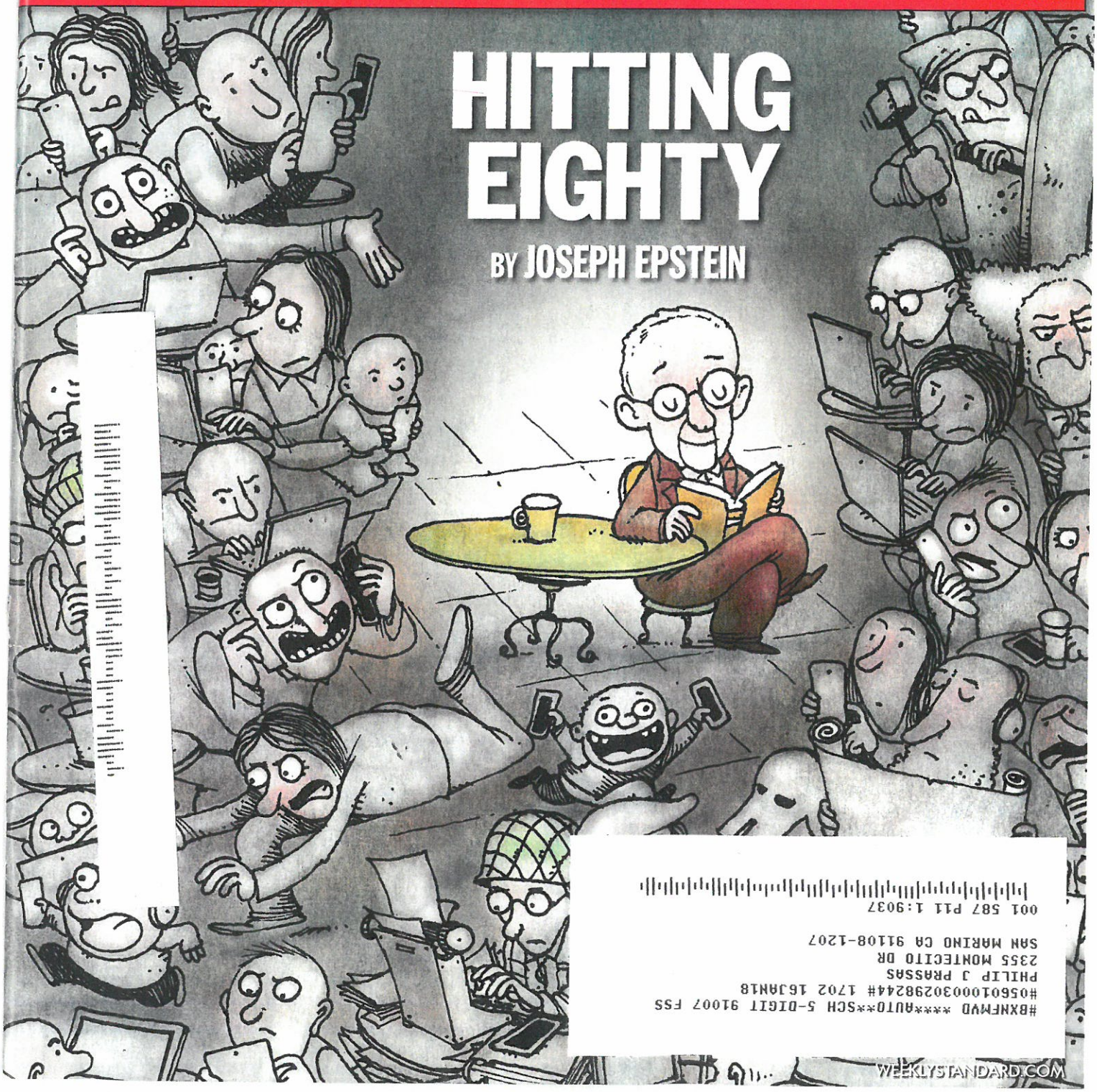
HITTING EIGHTY

BY JOSEPH EPSTEIN



Hitting Eighty

Life comes at you fast

By Joseph Epstein

Not to be born is best, when all is reckoned,
But when a man has seen the light of day
The next best thing by far is to go back
Where he came from, and as quick as he can.
Once youth is past, with all its follies,
Every affliction comes on him,
Envy, confrontation, conflict, battle, blood,
And last of all, old age lies in wait to besiege him,
Humiliated, cantankerous,
Friendless, sick and weak,
Worst evil of all.

—*Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles
(translation by David Grene)

I shall soon be hitting 80. Or perhaps it is more precise to say that 80 will soon be hitting me. Eighty, a stately, an august age, but a preposterous number nonetheless. When I began a job at *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1965, a document from the Personnel—not yet Human Resources—Department informed me that my retirement date would be 2002. The date, 2002, with its ridiculous futurity, caused me to smile. Well, 2002 is long since here and gone. The minutes, the hours, the days, the weeks, the months, even the years pass by at roughly the same pace. It's only the decades that seem to fly by.

Mine has been an immensely fortunate life, though, as Solon warned Croesus, never declare your good fortune until your last breath is drawn. This richest of men, king of Lydia, Croesus lived long enough to see the death of his son, the suicide of his wife, and the fall of his kingdom to the Persians. I have no kingdom to lose, and though I have over the years undergone some of the standard sadness—divorce, early death in the family—I have much for which to be grateful. Still, as Polybius, the Greek historian of Rome, had it: "Fortune is envious of mortal men, and is most apt to display her power at the very point where a man believes that he has been most blessed and successful in life." This is why I remain a fully paid-up subscriber to the Knock-Wood Insurance Company, from which I carry a long-term policy. If you're interested in such a policy yourself, contact my agent, Keina Hura.

I drew excellent cards in life, both personal and historical. Personally, I was born to generous, intelligent, and honorable parents, who provided economic security and early gave me the gift of freedom to discover the world on my own. Historically, my generation was too young for the Korean War, too old for the Vietnam war, and lived through a period of continuous economic prosperity in the most interesting country in the world. Ours was a low-population generation—children born toward the end of the Depression—so that colleges and universities wanted us, and we evaded the mad, sad scramble to gain admission to those schools that the world, great ninny that it is, mistakenly takes to be superior.

Ours was also the last generation to grow up eager for adulthood. After us, thanks to the cultural revolution of the late 1960s, staying youthful, forever youthful, was the desideratum; juvenility, not senility, as Tom Wolfe (a member in good standing of our generation) noted, was to be the chief age-related disease of the future. We, though, wanted to grow up, some of us perhaps too quickly. Many of us entered into marriages and had children in our early twenties. Philip Larkin spoke for us when he said that he gave up on Christianity upon learning that, in the afterlife, Christians would return to a childly state. Larkin's own childhood was less than happy; besides, he wanted the accoutrements of adulthood: long-play records, liquor, beautiful women, keys.

My generation grew up with memories of the country's one good war—World War II—hummed the sophisticated music of the Gershwin brothers, Rodgers and Hart, and Cole Porter, and found rock 'n' roll trivial, if not laughable. We learned about charm, our ideal of sophistication, and much else from the movies. We smoked cigarettes, drank Scotch and bourbon, and ordered dry martinis, went to work in suits, a small number of the men among us wore serious hats. We carried handkerchiefs. No one born after 1942, a contemporary of mine declared in a generalization that has held up nicely under my random sampling, carries a handkerchief. In the early 1970s, when I began teaching at a university, after the sixties had brought down the wall of formality, the first decision I faced was whether to teach in tie and jacket or jeans and open-collar shirt. I went for the tie and jacket; it felt more natural. Besides, by my thirties I owned no jeans.

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My generation also had the good fortune to be around for the impressive advantages in technology, not least medical technology, which has led to the prolongation of life. Among these advances, none has been more radical than the advent of the so-called Digital Age, that most mixed of mixed blessings. I have friends, contemporaries, who have decided to take a pass on everything to do with computers, tablets, smartphones—who needs a car, is their reasoning, a horse is good enough—and live, so to say, pre-digitally.

I am not among them, yet I remain impressed by the sheer goofiness of much that appears online, which I have seen described as "a vanity press for the demented," and where the law of contradictions has been banished. One day, googling myself (that new and necessary and slightly obscene-sounding verb when used reflexively), I discovered that I was simultaneously a homophobe and an old poof.

I'll accept the "old" part. One of the dangers of being old—for the moment setting death aside—is that one tends to overvalue the past. Machiavelli, in his *Discourses on Livy*, writes: "Men do always, but not always with reason, commend the past and condemn the present . . . [and] extol the days when they remember their youth to have been spent." Santayana holds that the reason the old have nothing but foreboding about the future is that they cannot imagine a world that is any good without their being in it. The temptation, when among contemporaries, is to lapse into what I call crank, in which everything in the past turns out to have been superior to anything in the present. Not true, of course, but oddly pleasant to indulge—even though one knows, as Noël Coward, who later in his life himself indulged in crank, had it, "There is no future in the past."

The detractions of old age are obvious: the lessening capacity for the active life, the weakening of the body, the diminution of sensual pleasure, the irrefutable nearness of death. Toss in memory loss and you get diminishment generally. Cicero, whose own old age was not lived at the Ritz—he was forced into exile and murdered by order of Marcus Antonius, his decapitated head and right hand hung up in the Forum—claimed that "older people who are reasonable, good-tempered, and gracious bear aging well. Those who are mean-spirited and irritable will be unhappy at every stage of their lives." Yet Schopenhauer, that never-less-than-impressive grouch, held that "we shall do best to think of life as a *desengaño*, as a process of disillusionment: since this is, clearly enough, what everything that happens to us is calculated to produce."

ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAVID CLARK

At 80, I remain, if not I trust entirely illusioned, still amused by the world. I find myself more impressed than ever by the mysteries of life, not least among them unmotivated altruism. In its elusiveness, human nature remains for me endlessly fascinating. No greater spectacle exists than watching it play out at endeavors high and low. I have a friend who reports that, every morning, his 88-year-old mother-in-law wakes and mutters "shit," cursing because she hadn't died in her sleep. I once read a letter from a man of 71, sent to my physician, saying that he had had enough of life and had decided to forgo chemotherapy for stomach cancer. At 80 I find I haven't had nearly enough of life and each morning upon waking, mutter "Thank you."

Part of my good fortune has been my health. ("So long as you have your health," the old Jews used to say—correctly, it turns out.) Several years ago I had heart-bypass surgery, and occasionally my immune system, betraying its name, lets me down. The most recent instance was my contracting a skin-blistering condition called (and best pronounced in a W.C. Fields accent) bullous pemphigoid. Apart from a five-minute stretching exercise in the shower, and the normal walking-about on errands, I do no formal exercise. I have friends my age contemplating triathlons, or who play tennis, singles, for 90-minute stretches. My own greatest athletic accomplishment at 80 is that I can still put on my trousers while standing up. When others speak of staying in shape, I wonder what shape it is precisely they have in mind.

Gradual loss of memory, short- and long-term, is a well-advertised part of the deal in aging. Isaiah Berlin, in a letter to a friend on his forthcoming 80th birthday, wrote: "But 80 is enough—now the decline—the order is one forgets names, then nouns, then everything: gagahood—the end."

This, however, if my own experience is any guide, is to make things appear more drastic than they are. True, one occasionally walks into a room in one's own apartment and requires a few seconds to remind oneself what it was, again, that brought one there. The title of a movie, the name of the author of a book, the quarterback who succeeded Joe Montana for the San Francisco 49ers elude one, though through the good offices of Google they may be recaptured quickly enough. One of the side benefits of memory loss is that, after a five-or-so-year hiatus, one forgets the plots of most movies and can see them again as if afresh.

Still, evidence regularly crops up suggesting my generation is about to hear the Great Publican's call, "Time, gentlemen, time." I go to lunch with a friend who tells me that he has had a pacemaker installed. Another friend is recovering from bypass surgery. An old college roommate informs me that he has been diagnosed with Parkinson's. A boyhood pal has had two unsuccessful spinal surgeries and a prostate operation. We grow old, we grow old, we shall soon wear a lot more than our trousers rolled.

In our twenties, at lunches, my male friends and I talked a fair amount about sports and sex; in our thirties and forties and fifties, food and movies and politics were the main subjects. Since our seventies, health has taken over as topic number one. Sleep is a big item: No one seems to sleep through the night without having to get up two or three or more times. The fortunate ones among us are those who can get back to sleep. The old brutish masculine question of our twenties—"Getting much?"—now refers not to sex but to sleep.

I appear moderately fit, I am neither over- nor underweight, I have a respectable amount of hair (most of it gray) on my head and none whatsoever on my legs. I have not yet developed a walk sufficiently odd to put in for a grant from *Monty Python*'s Ministry of Silly Walks. When alone, I find it difficult to think of myself as soon to be 80. I am, I suppose, a youthful 80—an oxymoron if ever I heard one. I don't think of myself as 26, mind you, or 38. If pressed, what I think of myself as is a squishy middling age—57, say. One would prefer to look ageless. The truth is that, on a good day, I might pass for 74.

Still, there it is, that rude number 80. Eighty, it occurs to me, might make one too aged even to qualify as a dirty old man. I was never a Casanova-like seducer, nor claimed to be a champion sack artist, yet it is saddening to consider oneself entirely out of contention in the sexual realm. The knowledge that the beautiful young girl one finds oneself staring at is likely to consider you, sexually, out of the question *does* take the air out of one's fantasies.

On the other, not-yet-palsied hand, near 80 I find (small compensation though it may seem) that I am able to compliment women on their beauty without their feeling that I am hitting on them. "Were I a mere 40 years younger," I found myself saying to a cheerful waitress not long ago, "I should pursue you with all the cunning currently at my disposal." Perhaps she can fantasize about me when I was 40—make that, to be safe, 50—years younger. Perhaps, more important, my dear wife can forgive me for this necessary but awkward paragraph. But then men, as I used regularly to tell my beautiful granddaughter, are brutes.

Within a block of where I live there are two retirement homes, and two blocks in the other direction is Northwestern University. The majority of pedestrians I encounter on the street are bent over—the elderly on their walkers, the young over their smartphones. The spectacle reminds me of a passage in *Time Regained*, the final volume of Proust's great novel:

> Life at such moments seems to us a theatrical pageant in which from one to another we see the baby turn into a youth and the youth into a mature man, who in the next act totters toward the grave.

Eighty is not without its pleasures. One is that one sees the trajectory of others' lives and careers—"the trajectory from life to death, with the final vertical plunge not far away," Proust called it in *Time Regained.* One thinks here of those prodigies who came whirring out of the gate but lost ground on the second turn, with nothing left for the home stretch. Or those who were good at school but, as it turned out, nothing else. Or those who made all the predictably correct career and personal moves and yet ended up with supremely boring lives. Or those whose success, given their utter absence of talent and paucity of charm, remind one that the world is not an entirely just place.

Again, I think of my own good luck through life. Going to the University of Chicago, which I did in a blindly stumbling way, turned out to be a crucial step, giving me a primitive but genuine sense of a high culture foreign to my upbringing but which nonetheless seemed worth attempting to attain. I sometimes think I decided on a career as a writer because there was nothing else I could do: I was too squeamish for medicine, insufficiently bright for higher science, too heedless of close detail for law, too easily bored for business.

I was lucky (again) to have come of age when there was still a military draft, which gave me two years between leaving school and having to go out into the world. I began writing in earnest in the Army and published my first bits of journalism while there at the age of 22. In the Army, too, while at dreary Fort Hood in Texas, I put in for the job of clerk typist at a recruiting station either in Little Rock, Arkansas, or Shreveport, Louisiana. I was told by a gruff first sergeant that one of these jobs was mine and that I had a choice, Shreveport or Little Rock. With perhaps a half-second to answer, I blurted out, "Little Rock, Sergeant." In Little Rock, I met and married my first wife, with whom I had my two sons. What, I have often wondered, if I had said "Shreveport, Sergeant"?

After the Army, I moved to New York, where I worked on a now-forgotten political magazine, whose chief benefit was meeting Hilton Kramer, another editor there who, though nine years older and vastly more sophisticated than I, befriended me. Several years later, Hilton put up my name and wrote a strong recommendation on my behalf, as

a candidate for the editorship of the *American Scholar*, the quarterly published by Phi Beta Kappa. Not a member of Phi Beta Kappa, nor ever even a good student, I was sublimely confident I had no chance for the job, even though I was put on the short list of candidates. I saw the interview as an expense-paid day in New York.

All I can remember of the interview itself is that a man on the hiring committee named Edgar Shannon, then president of the University of Virginia, asked me what I would do for young readers if I were made editor of the journal. "Let them grow older," I answered—which must have rung the gong, for I was chosen for the job. I edited the *American Scholar* from my home in Evanston, aided by two splendid sub-editors, Jean Stipicevic and Sandra Costich, in Washington. As I explained to them on numerous occasions, the division of labor here was clear: They did all the work and I took all the credit, which is pretty much how things worked out.

Acquiring the editorship of the *American Scholar* was a lovely bit of luck, but then so was my other job, teaching in the English department at Northwestern. This came about earlier, through the offices of the literary critic Irving Howe, for whose magazine *Dissent* I (then a freelancer) wrote two essays. Howe, an eminence in his day, instructed the head of the English department that there was a fellow in town named Joseph Epstein who someday figured to have a strong reputation as a writer and that he ought to hire him. *Mirabile dictu*, the man did, even though I have no advanced degrees, or ever acquired any. Better yet, my Northwestern job was without tenure—each year, for 30 years, I was asked if I should like to stay on for another year—so that I never had to attend any faculty meetings and listen to the petty squabbles of my colleagues. If the reigning sin of capitalism is greed, and that of socialism is envy, from their conversation I grasped that that of academic life is resentment.

So there I was, with two relatively cushy jobs, both sounding more prestige-laden than they truly were, the two together not requiring anything like my full energy. I am a man who has made a respectable living without having had to go into an office regularly since 1970, and owing to these jobs I am, today, a thing I'd never thought I'd be: a pensioner. To fill in the time, and to evade boredom, I have been able to write and edit 30 or so books. My luck seems to have held out, for thus far I haven't run out of things to write about or editors who agree to publish and, most astonishing of all, pay me for my various scribblings. We are all audodidacts. The only difference is that I, because of a certain small skill acquired over the years at constructing sentences, happen to have conducted my self-education in public.

I should like to say that my current age has mellowed me, made me calmer and wiser, more thoughtful generally. Alas, it is not so. I find myself as easily ticked off as ever at inefficiency, bad manners, what I take to be stupidity in high places. Seeing those I take to be the wrong people vaunted can also tick me off—though no longer to the max, since I have come to understand that this is the way of the world. I do not allow myself to get as worked up about political subjects as formerly, my patience having lengthened a notch or two. If there is any reason behind these modest improvements in self-deportment, it is perhaps to be found in my reminding myself (as if any reminder is required) that I shall before long be departing the planet, and there is no point in spending any of the time remaining to me with a red face. The thought lends me a certain detachment, though nothing, mind you, approaching serenity.

The most difficult thing about aging is time—the obvious fact that one is running out of it. At 80, one is playing well into the fourth quarter, if not in overtime. To change from a basketball to a gambling metaphor, at 80 one is also playing on house money. That, though, doesn't diminish one's greed for more time still. From roughly 60 on, the obituary columns of the *New York Times* have become the first thing I check, partly to see if anyone I know has pegged out but also to discover how old the newly dead were. A fine morning is when the subjects of the paper's main obituaries are all over 90; a dreary one is when most were still in their 70s, or younger.

Life at 80 is marked by a sense of delimitation. Santayana wrote that whatever one's age, one should always assume that one still has a decade left to live. In one of his letters he noted that, in his early 80s, his physician wanted him to lose 15 pounds, adding that he apparently desired him in perfect health just in time for his death. (He lived to 88.) In his 80s my friend Edward Shils still bought dishes and other new household items: "It gives one a sense of futurity," he explained.

I find the English phrase "This should see me out" more and more coming to mind. I shall probably not, in my lifetime, buy another suit. (A friend in the clothing business tells me that only lawyers buy suits nowadays.) I own two good overcoats. I may have enough shoes to play on through. I have some 40-odd neckties, no fewer than seven scarves, and a single ascot, which I may work up the nerve to wear if I make it to 85. These should see me out.

If one is fortunate enough to make it into one's 90s, the problem, outside health, figures to be friendlessness. I have myself felt the loss of dear friends for at least a decade

now. I happen to have had many friends seven and eight years older than I, and a few much older than that, most of whom are gone. Some among them were also important to me as sources of approval. The good opinion of my writing by Hilton Kramer, John Gross, Dan Jacobson, and Edward Shils—four men notable for their intellectual penetration and lovely sense of humor—meant a great deal to me. Their approval boosted my self-esteem, or as I prefer to think it, my self-Epstein. I know precisely what Sybille Bedford meant when, in her book *Jigsaw*, she wrote: "Hope of approval by a handful of elders and betters: yes; aiming at sales, fashion, success: no." In his letters, Isaiah Berlin begins at 60 to complain that there is no one left for him to look up to. Berlin himself, of course, was a man up to whom a great many younger men looked, and even now, long after his death in 1997, still do. Yet the world seems impoverished without people inhabiting it one admires without qualification.

At 80, I wonder if I have already reached the status of back number. Some years ago Murray Kempton wrote about Arthur J. Goldberg, who, some will recall, was the former attorney for the AFL-CIO, the former secretary of labor under John F. Kennedy, the former Supreme Court justice, the former ambassador to the United Nations. Kempton gave his article the title "The Former Arthur Goldberg." For some years now, I have begun to sniff something of this same odor of formeraldehyde about myself. I have seen myself described as the former editor of the *American Scholar*. I am, officially, a lecturer emeritus at Northwestern, and people no longer address me (wrongly) as Dr. Epstein. When they did, I had to restrain myself from saying, "Read two chapters of Henry James and get right into bed; I'll be over as soon as I can."

Five or six years ago, a famous journalist told a friend of mine that that very day was his 80th birthday, but he wasn't telling anyone. He, the journalist, specialized in the status life and on being with-it in a high-powered way, and 80, by its very nature, carried with it more than a mere suggestion of being out of it. I have no such problem. I rather like the notion of being out of it and am closing in on achieving the blessed state. I know the names of fewer and fewer movie stars and, on the street, could not distinguish Cate Blanchett from Keira Knightley. Once a regular moviegoer, I now almost never go to the movies and am content to wait six months, a year, or longer for the arrival of a promising (of which there seem to be fewer and fewer) movie to come out in DVD. I have scant interest in any movie about people under 40. I have almost arrived at the condition of a friend who, emerging from another disappointing contemporary movie, announced, "I never want to see another movie I haven't seen before."

In politics, I seem to have arrived at the same position, if not the same politics, as the British historian A.J.P. Taylor, who once claimed for himself "extreme views, weakly held." Most of my views these days are backed up by very few facts. At 80, is one really supposed to take time out to read up on the trade bill, know the name of the Indian minister of defense, or have a clear position on the safe-road amendment currently up before the Illinois legislature? I don't believe so. My current interest in travel is nil. I shall die content not having seen Khartoum or Patagonia. I'll be all right without another trip to Europe. "When a man is tired of London," Samuel Johnson pronounced, "he is tired of life." But then, Johnson knew London, and England with it, before its leading figures were those two knights of doleful countenance, Sir Elton and Sir Mick.

As for books, I mentioned to someone the other day that I was slowly reading my way through Theodor Mommsen's majestic four-volume *History of Rome*. "You don't read any crappy books, do you?" he said. With the grave yawning, I replied, why would I? As a literary man, I used to make an effort to keep up with contemporary novels and poetry, but no longer feel it worth the effort. No more 500- and 600-page novels for me written by guys whose first name is Jonathan. I have given the current batch of English novelists—Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes, Salman Rushdie—a fair enough shot to realize I need read no more of them; their novels never spoke to me, and are less likely than ever to do so now. I glimpse poems in the *New Yorker*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and in the few literary quarterlies to which I still subscribe; but none stick in the mind, and poor poetry itself has come to seem little more than an intramural sport, restricted in interest largely to those people who continue to write the stuff.

About visual artists, whereas once I would have been ashamed not to know the names Frank Stella, Robert Motherwell, and Fairfield Porter, today I shamelessly acknowledge I cannot name a single working painter or sculptor. About installation and performance artists, don't even ask. Out of it, nicely, happily out of it.

"There is," says Sophocles, "no one without suffering; the happy are those who have the least of it." The reliably cheerful Schopenhauer adds: "No man is happy but strives his whole life long after a supposed happiness which he seldom attains, and even if he does it is only to be disappointed with it; as a rule, however, he finally enters harbor shipwrecked and dismasted."

Schopenhauer is, of course, correct: Happiness is a fool's goal; contentment is a more reasonable expectation. Measurements for contentment are not easily established, but the one I prefer is the absence of regrets. Here I count myself fortunate yet again. I have only two regrets in what is now my lengthy life: that I did not study classics and learn Latin and Greek when young, and less serious, that I

do not live in a place where I look out on water. As regrets go, these are trivial stuff—pathetic, really. I am a man who found the right work, married (the second time) the right woman, live in the right place. Such disappointments as I have known I have brought on myself by not working hard enough or being thoughtful enough. A lucky life, mine, touch wood, and may the evil eye not visit me.

For a thoroughly lucky life, one would need to die a painless death not preceded by an illness. Not so easy to arrange. The Greeks, Jacob Burckhardt reports, spent their days "in perpetual contemplation of approaching death." Socrates' was the most admirable death history provides: self-imposed in the presence of friends. Seneca talks a big game about death, noting that every journey has its end, that "life itself is slavery if the courage to die be absent," and insisting that it's best to remember that you didn't exist before you were born and you will return to that state when you die.

Yet Seneca, Nero's tutor and later adviser, and history's first speechwriter, in the end underwent an enforced and sadly botched suicide, his veins too desiccated to allow the blood from his cut wrists to flow quickly, a death Tacitus describes in crushing detail.

Montaigne was perhaps the most death-minded of all great writers. He deals with the subject in a number of his essays, chief among them "On Fear," "That We Should Not Be Deemed Happy Until After Our Death," and "To Philosophize Is to Learn How to Die." Life, Montaigne felt, must be tried "on the touchstone of this final deed."

> In judging another's life, I always see how its end was borne: and one of my main concerns for my own is that it be borne well—that is, in a quiet and muted manner.

Wisdom, Montaigne held, ought to teach us not to be afraid of dying. Therefore, it follows that the best way of dealing with death is not to put it out of mind—"what brutish insensitivity can produce so gross a blindness"—but to think almost relentlessly about it, "to educate and train [our souls] for their encounter with that adversary, death." He himself claimed to have always been besieged by thoughts of death, "even in the most licentious period of my life." Montaigne wished to die while working on the cabbages in his garden. Instead he died, at 59, an arbitrary and tortured death by quinsy, an abscess that chokes off breathing.

I have never been able to take Montaigne's advice. While I was never so naïve as to ignore that death was the second main fact—after birth—of life, even now I have not been able to brood upon it. I have a short attention span—lucky again—that has never allowed me to undergo serious depression or even to linger for long on unpleasant thoughts. Suicide has never entered my mind.

Unlike the woman mentioned earlier who each morning arises to say "shit" because she's still here, I wake grateful that I am and hope my visit can be extended. I still like it here, still find much to amuse, and a few things yet to charm, me. I understand the longing for death at the close of a long life, especially if the end is accompanied by pain, or even if it is accompanied by disappointment or fatigue. I do not ignore the supreme fact of death, and I can easily imagine a world without my insignificant presence in it. The utter nullity after death, though, I find difficult to grasp. I envy people with strong religious faith, for whom the death question has been put to rest, but have never myself been able, and now don't expect ever, to find it.

I have few hopes of being remembered beyond the lifespans of my three grandchildren. I have left instructions not to have a memorial after I vacate the premises, having attended too many where the wrong people arrange to speak and, in their remarks, get the recently dead person impressively out of focus. I have left instructions to be cremated, my ashes buried in a plot next to my parents, a simple gravestone, like theirs, setting out my name, birth and death dates.

I have friends in their mid- and late-80s, and even a few in their early 90s, who still find much pleasure in life and bring pleasure to others. With the continued support of the Knock-Wood Insurance Company and modern medicine, I hope to emulate them. I realize that I may be served an eviction notice at any time. I suppose I am as prepared as any normally disorderly fellow can be, though one thing I haven't taken care of, if my death turns out to be a peaceful one, is the matter of last words. Goethe has already taken "More light." Beethoven has used up "Applaud, my friends, the comedy is finished." I prefer something more in the mode of Lope de Vega (1562-1635), the Spanish playwright and poet, who on his deathbed asked his physician if he thought he would make it through the night, and when told he was unlikely to do so, remarked, "Very well, then, Dante's a bore." As for myself, thus far the best I have been able to come up with is "I should have ordered the Mongolian beef."

A perhaps too relentless self-chronicler, I seem to have written essays on turning 50 ("An Older Dude"), 60 ("Will You Still Feed Me?"), 70 ("Kid Turns Seventy"), and now this. If only I can get to 130 or 140—who knows, there just might be a book in it. ◆