PEA CLASS OF 1958 50TH REUNION COLLOQUIUM
LIFE AFTER 65 ISN’T WHAT IT USED TO BE. WHAT’S NEXT FOR US?

STILL IN CHARGE
Background essay by John LeGates

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We have lots of life ahead of us. How long, productive and satisfying it will be is largely under our own control. We can conservatively expect to be unimpaired until 82 and alive until 90. The big three for health are not smoking, exercise, and weight. The big two for quality-of-life are staying engaged and having personal relationships. But the concerns and challenges will grow. Among them are fear of aging and dying, maintaining careers/activities, protecting our well being, and wrapping up our legacies.

LONGEVITY AND QUALITY

When I set out to organize this panel, I told my lovely wife, “I think I’ll start with the basics: how about the mortality/morbidity tables?” Her reply was, “Well that will certainly brighten them up.” My response, “Yes, I think so”.

By chance, while I was a senior, I was drawn into a discussion with an alumnus and the development officer escorting him around. The alumnus asked “How many are still alive for the 50th?” The answer, “most of them, but after that they start dropping off pretty quickly.”

Since then we’ve seen both a longevity revolution and a “quality-of-aging” revolution. We’ve learned that with proper care, the brain doesn’t lose cells, muscles don’t lose strength, and sexual activity doesn’t stop, or even become less satisfying. We’re in new territory and we have no role models.
A male born in 1890 – the group having an Exeter 50\textsuperscript{th} while we were there – had an average life expectancy of 42 years. If he had survived to have a 50\textsuperscript{th} (still alive at 68) he would have about a decade to go, age 78. A male born in 1940 will average 68 years (nervous yet?). But if still alive at 68, can expect 11 more years, age 79. It seems that making it this far is most of the game. But when we toss in work, wealth and education, our prospects massacre the averages.

The difference between the lowest and highest education groups is about 6 years; call it 3 years between average and highest. We’re probably a touch above what they call highest. Give us 5 years – now we’re up to 84. Even greater is the difference between those in the labor force and those not: working adds 12 years. Give us another 6 for that – we’re now up to 90.

Some studies suggest that health doesn’t just correlate with wealth, but actually causes it. And some others suggest that education causes better health. If you believe these results (and I don’t) a simple syllogism says that merely going to Exeter makes you live 11 years longer.

OK we’re alive, but is it a life worth living? Yes, it seems. Average unimpaired expectancy for a 65-year-old is 11 years. But with 12 or more years of education, that grows by 4 years to 15. Give us 16. That means “active” (unimpaired) until 82. Another approach claims that 90 per cent of people between 65 and 74 have no major disabilities, and 40 percent of those over 85 are fully functional.

In summary, we can expect to be unimpaired until at least 82, alive until 90. The numbers are projected from currently-known phenomena. They’re not solid, but they identify the ballpark. To get the real figures, ask again around 2040.
But what do they mean for each of us personally? The variability within the group turns out to be far greater than the differences we’ve looked at thus far. If family history, lifestyle and health indicators are poor, your life expectancy drops to 68 (read the rest of this quickly). If good, it rises to 102. Go to the MSN Money Life Expectancy calculator: http://moneycentral.msn.com/investor/calcs/n_expect/main.asp and try it on yourself.

“Obviously” (a mathematical term meaning “it cannot be proven” – Ransom Lynch) we are not at, or even near, the end. What factors (I’ll flunk any paper using the word “factor” – H. Darcy Curwen) make a difference, and which can we influence? Below is just a list of topics. You fill in the details from your own life.

Starting with maintaining good health, a large number of authorities seem to converge on a small list of considerations:

**HEALTH**

- Don’t smoke. If you do smoke, quit. It’s never too late.
- Next most important, exercise.
- Keep your weight where it should be.
- Drink, if at all, in moderation.
- Eat regular meals, lots of fruits and vegetables, limit animal fat.
- Get enough sleep.
- Drive carefully, recognize when to quit.
- Get an annual prostate cancer check.
LIVE WELL

Stay engaged: Keep working, or do responsible volunteering. If you retire, replace that time with something meaningful. Create or produce. Plan for the future. Go back to school. Develop or expand hobbies.

Stay or become socially active: Have at least three close friends. Stay close to your children and grandchildren. Be active with a church. Get emotional sustenance from religion. Be part of a tight-knit community.

Have a happy marriage. The “happy” part counts.

Have enough money so that you don’t worry about it.

Be an extrovert.

OTHER THINGS

Sex into your eighties and beyond is normal. It correlates with longevity, health and a positive view of life. Elders do it less often and less energetically, but with increased satisfaction and more concern for the satisfaction of the partner. But as you age, it becomes ever more a “use it or lose it” capacity. In a rational world, Medicare would pay for it.

Unfortunately we don’t live in a society that reveres its elderly or its ancestors. In fact there are forces at play to shuffle them off out of sight without regard to their well-being.

Consider the incentives of your heirs. The longer you live, the more of your heritable wealth you consume. They may suffer “negative inheritance,” where the costs of caring for you exceed what you might leave them. Our laws permit them to declare you incompetent (with a little help from a doctor and a judge). They can take control of
your assets, give them to themselves, declare you bankrupt, and put you in a state-funded care facility. Don’t smirk – it happens and it happens often. If you don’t have heirs, the state can do it. Even Massachusetts General Hospital can do it, per a recent *Globe* expose.

There are steps we can take to avoid these problems. They include a well-done will, medical directive, health-care proxy, and durable power of attorney. Review them every few years. Even if your own wishes don’t change, the laws might.

On the other hand, we’re a growing demographic, and the free market, along with our own activism, is helping. You’ve all gotten those invitations to an educational tour with fellow Exonians. There are elderhostels, elder cruises, elder investment clubs (which often beat the pants off the professionals) and a host of other tailored groups. My town has a “Council on Aging” that provides activity and care; it’s good.

To retire or not to retire: that is the question. And it keeps being the question. People begin the retirement they’ve looked forward to for so long. But there’s the loss of meaning, of companionship, of accomplishment, of structure. After about two years, they return to work. But there’s the loss of self-determination, the schedules and deadlines, the inflexibility. After about two years they retire again. After about two years, guess what. And another two, guess what again. This phenomenon isn’t rare at all, especially among high achievers.

Then there’s Social Security and Medicare. There’s a lot of press coverage about Social Security going bankrupt. Medicare is actually worse. The combination is a fiscal time bomb. As a growing demographic, we’re threatening to overthrow the economy – more people taking out than putting in. There are no solutions. Where there’s death, there’s hope.

And we’re at least as vulnerable as others to the larger, vaguer threats to society. Remember the list from the class survey: global
warming, world-wide pandemic, terrorism, nuclear war etc. The older we get the more we’re vulnerable to disease, less flexible, less mobile and lower on the emergency priority lists.

Medical care for the aging is a shaky proposition. Just as with the young, the old require specialized knowledge. One medical school study shows that people treated by a geriatrician, rather than their regular doctor, are a third less likely to become disabled, 50 per cent less likely to be depressed and 40 per cent less likely to require home health care services. First the bad news: a few months after that study was published, the school closed down its geriatric division; as have many others. For a variety of reasons, doctors don’t like to practice geriatrics and hospitals don’t calculate it to be cost effective. There will be nowhere near enough geriatricians to serve our age group. The good news is that schools are including more geriatrics in their standard curricula. Medical students who claim they’ve learned about caring for the elderly have increased from about 12 percent in 2001 to 20 percent in 2007.

Society is far more mobile than it was. The average American moves every four years. On the plus side for us, travel and access to remote things are easy. On the minus side, our families and friends are dispersed. Lots of elders move closer to their children, who then get transferred to somewhere else.

To some extent, our futures will be shaped by echoes from our past. If we never smoked, our prospects are better than if we had. If we didn’t have children, they won’t look after us in old age. If we stashed away a nest egg, we don’t have to start stashing now. If we don’t already belong to a tight-knit group, is it too late? Does tradition or habit lock us into a great or poor living space? Will we replay the behavior patterns of our parents – for better or worse?

Man is believed (by man) to be the only creature aware of its own mortality. Some fear death, some embrace it as the culmination of life and gateway to another world, and some ignore it. Fear of death is classified by some researchers into “fear of pain,” “fear of the
unknown,” “fear of non-existence,” and “fear of eternal punishment.” The degree of fear doesn’t correlate with degree of religious faith. But people who haven’t confirmed their religious faith, or lack thereof, get more fearful as they get older. You can check yourself out on the Death Anxiety Scale and the Hoelter Multidimensional Fear of Death Scale.

Fear of aging itself seems to be shaped by culture. Germans worry most about losing memory or mental alertness. Dutch fear gaining weight. Thais worry about fading eyesight. Belgians worry more about incontinence than any other nationality. Brazilians fear losing sexual desire and teeth (Freud says that dreams about loss of teeth mean fear of castration). Indians are concerned about losing hair or going gray. Egyptians don’t worry about aging much at all. Americans are the most multi-faceted. We worry about loss of energy, trouble caring for ourselves, memory loss and weight gain. “Nursing home phobia” has now been given semi-formal psychiatric status, and as we age may exceed all other fears combined.

The fear of death and aging can facilitate death and aging itself. It’s worth trying to control it.

The next era for us will be the time of evaluating our legacies and perhaps making an effort to shape them. Here’s a tool that might help: Write your own obituary. Try it as it would stand today. Try it again as you would like it to be.
WRAP UP

I remember our local friendly poet, Robert Frost. When I heard his poem *Provide, Provide*, I was shocked at such a materialistic, unpoetic sentiment. Now I suspect that he was right on the money, so to speak.

*The witch that came (the withered hag)*
*To wash the steps with pail and rag,*
*Was once the beauty Abishag,*

*The picture pride of Hollywood.*
*Too many fall from great and good*
*For you to doubt the likelihood.*

*Die early and avoid the fate.*
*Or if predestined to die late,*
*Make up your mind to die in state.*

*Make the whole stock exchange your own!*  
*If need be occupy a throne,*
*Where nobody can call you crone.*

*Some have relied on what they knew;*
*Others on simply being true.*
*What worked for them might work for you.*

*No memory of having starred*
*Atones for later disregard,*
*Or keeps the end from being hard.*

*Better to go down dignified*
*With boughten friendship at your side*
*Than none at all. Provide, provide!*

And finally a quote from my mother
*The older I get, the more fun it is.*
MORE READING

There is more information on this topic than you can read in a lifetime. You probably can’t read it as fast as it is being written. Any combination of relevant words on a search engine will produce acres of findings, often contradicting each other. These are a few of the ones I found most interesting. Some links are primary research, others are popular summaries.

http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/04/30/070430fa_fact_gawande
This article appeared in the New Yorker, 04/30/2007. It’s an overview of how gerontology works.
http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1115695-1,00.html
Dr. Weil on how to age gracefully from Time magazine 10/09/2005.
http://www.oprah.com/health/lifestages/realage/health_real_main.jhtml
Test your real age, as opposed to your chronological age. From Oprah’s web site.
http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/hus06.pdf#027 Wallow in statistics about mortality and morbidity by age, country, locale, ailment and much more. Good index.
http://books.google.com/books?id=CT1GgunY_-IC&pg=PA68&lpg=PA68&dq=age+morbidity&source=web&ots=paWo8orKR3&sig=i1vwAEbtv8vYfuIL951fpL4Efh8 Biologic Variation in Health and Illness, Academic study
http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0005140.html Life expectancy by age 1850-2004
https://content.nejm.org/cgi/content/abstract/329/2/110  New England Journal of Medicine study of Educational Status and Active Life Expectancy.
http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/editorials/articles/2008/01/18/old_sick_and_unbefriended/ - Frightening Boston Globe Investigative report on “unbefriended elders” involuntarily shunted off to nursing homes
http://www.questionpro.com/akira/showSurveyLibrary.do?surveyID=24916 A sample Death Anxiety Scale questionnaire
http://books.google.com/books?id=CRvGZBrzud0C&pg=PA104&lpg=PA104&dq=hoelter+multidimensional+fear+of+death+scale&source=web&ots=x1A-BHhiBd&sig=ixFkBzO5rvg0MfTWDOQAL9LV5HI#PPP1,M1 - The Death Anxiety Handbook
“OLD MEN SHOULD BE EXPLORERS”
(T.S. Eliot)
Background essay by Winslow Myers

The psychoanalyst Erik Erikson has written extensively on the “normal” stages of a human life. After the “career” phase, in which Erikson defines the primary conflict as between “generativity” and “stagnation,” he posits a stage corresponding to the one we ourselves are entering each at his own peculiar pace, where the issue is “ego integrity” versus “despair”. As a complement to John’s concise summation of current and predictive geriatric sociology, let’s look at the process of growing old from the inside out.

Is it possible to ask more of old age than merely clinging to a decent image, called ego integrity, of who we are and have been?

- Erikson defines the wisdom of old age as “a detached interest in life itself, in the face of death itself.” How can that strength become useful to others in our lives? To the world at large?

- Exeter helped to seed ambition into many of us, and by doing so perhaps also exacerbated ambition’s shadow, a ‘puritan’ guilt that says no matter how much we have achieved, it is never enough. If so, how do we see the place of that ambition in our total life-patterns? Is it beginning to diminish in importance?

- Does “successful” aging consolidate a self-concept that seems consistent over the entire life-process, or does it allow for a shucking-off of past selves in favor of some new freedom? This suggests the difference between a Western, Freudian conception of ego and an Eastern conception where the end of life involves moving beyond the “householder” function in order to pursue some form of spiritual liberation of self and others.
• Complementary to the question about ambition and guilt, what have we learned from failure, whether in our work or marriage or parenting, that ends up constituting a wisdom that might be useful to each other?

These questions are only suggestions. You will come up with better ones. But as an enriching context for dialogue, here is a well-known poem by Tennyson, a lesser known one by Wallace Stevens, and some excerpts from Eliot’s “Four Quartets that address in poetry some of the challenges of aging. There will not be a test. Life seems to provide tests enough.

Tennyson’s “Ulysses”

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.

I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: all times I have enjoyed
Greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone; on shore, and when
Through scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vexed the dim sea: I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known; cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honoured of them all;
And drunk delight of battle with my peers;
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.
I am part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch where through
Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!
As though to breath were life. Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me
Little remains: but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
And this grey spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle —
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and through soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:
There gloom the dark broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me —
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads — you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Stevens’s “Large Red Man Reading”

There were ghosts that returned to earth to hear his phrases,
As he sat there reading, aloud, the great blue tabulae.
There were those from the wilderness of stars that had expected more.

There were those that returned to hear him read from the poem of life, Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them.

They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into reality, That would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the frost And cried out to feel it again, have run fingers over leaves And against the most coiled thorn, have seized on what was ugly

And laughed, as he sat there reading, from out of the purple tabulae, The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law: Poesis, poesis, the literal characters, the vatic lines,

Which in those ears and in those thin, those spended hearts, Took on color, took on shape and the size of things as they are
And spoke the feeling for them, which is what they had lacked.

Excerpts from T.S. Eliot’s “Four Quartets”

There is, it seems to us,
At best, only a limited value
In the knowledge derived from experience.
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,
For the pattern is new in every moment
And every moment is a new and shocking
Valuation of all we have been. We are only undeceived
Of that which, deceiving, could no longer harm.
In the middle, not only in the middle of the way
But all the way, in a dark wood, in a bramble,
On the edge of a grimen, where is no secure foothold,
And menaced by monsters, fancy lights,
Risking enchantment. Do not let me hear
Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,
Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,
Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God.
The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.

Old men ought to be explorers
Here or there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.
It seems, as one becomes older,  
That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence—  
Or even development: the latter a partial fallacy  
Encouraged by superficial notions of evolution,  
Which becomes, in the popular mind, a means of disowning the past.  
The moments of happiness—not the sense of well-being,  
Fruition, fulfilment, security or affection,  
Or even a very good dinner, but the sudden illumination—  
We had the experience but missed the meaning,  
And approach to the meaning restores the experience  
In a different form, beyond any meaning  
We can assign to happiness. I have said before  
That the past experience revived in the meaning  
Is not the experience of one life only  
But of many generations—not forgetting  
Something that is probably quite ineffable:  
The backward look behind the assurance  
Of recorded history, the backward half-look  
Over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror.  
Now, we come to discover that the moments of agony  
(Whether, or not, due to misunderstanding,  
Having hoped for the wrong things or dreaded the wrong things,  
Is not in question) are likewise permanent  
With such permanence as time has. We appreciate this better  
In the agony of others, nearly experienced,  
Involving ourselves, than in our own.  
For our own past is covered by the currents of action,  
But the torment of others remains an experience  
Unqualified, unworn by subsequent attrition.  
People change, and smile: but the agony abides.

You cannot face it steadily, but this thing is sure,  
That time is no healer: the patient is no longer here.  
When the train starts, and the passengers are settled  
To fruit, periodicals and business letters
(And those who saw them off have left the platform)
Their faces relax from grief into relief,
To the sleepy rhythm of a hundred hours.
Fare forward, travellers! not escaping from the past
Into different lives, or into any future;
You are not the same people who left that station
Or who will arrive at any terminus,
While the narrowing rails slide together behind you;
And on the deck of the drumming liner
Watching the furrow that widens behind you,
You shall not think 'the past is finished'
Or 'the future is before us'.
At nightfall, in the rigging and the aerial,
Is a voice descanting (though not to the ear,
The murmuring shell of time, and not in any language)
'Fare forward, you who think that you are voyaging;
You are not those who saw the harbour
Receding, or those who will disembark.
Here between the hither and the farther shore
While time is withdrawn, consider the future
And the past with an equal mind.
At the moment which is not of action or inaction
You can receive this: "on whatever sphere of being
The mind of a man may be intent
At the time of death" — that is the one action
(And the time of death is every moment)
Which shall fructify in the lives of others:
And do not think of the fruit of action.
Fare forward.

— Excerpts from Eliot’s third Quartet, “Dry Salvages”

Since our concern was speech, and speech impelled us
To purify the dialect of the tribe
And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight,
Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age
To set a crown upon your lifetime's effort.
First, the cold friction of expiring sense
Without enchantment, offering no promise
But bitter tastelessness of shadow fruit
As body and soul begin to fall asunder.
Second, the conscious impotence of rage
At human folly, and the laceration
Of laughter at what ceases to amuse.
And last, the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others' harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.
Then fools' approval stings, and honour stains.
From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit
Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire
Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.'

— Excerpt from Eliot’s fourth Quartet, “Little Gidding”