



I'm about to turn 80. It's a rite of passage that's very much on my mind nowadays.

If the same is true of my contemporaries, well, they're doing a good job of keeping it to themselves. Most of them aren't publicly trumpeting (or bewailing) the occasion.

The fact is, that other than attaining octogenarian status, nothing significant occurs on this birthday. I doubt I'll become eligible for something new or automatically precluded from any activities. (Contrary to legend, I'll still have to pay to get on a ski slope.) The people I encounter in the months ahead – even those aware of the event – are unlikely to treat me in a different manner.

But it is, I feel, an appropriate time for some personal reflections.

I've engaged in similar musings at various junctures in my life – for my 25th college reunion, then upon turning 50 and 55, when contemplating retirement in my 60's, for my 50th college reunion, and as I hit 75. Some of what I penned earlier remains applicable to this current rumination (and I'll filch the best stuff), while other aspects have evolved (as you'll see).

THREE SCORE AND TWENTY

Parts of this piece have a negative tone, but I'll begin with the one indisputable *plus* to turning 80 for me and my chronological comrades: WE MADE IT! The painful reality that a growing number of our brethren haven't made the cut reinforces our achievement. Hey, look! – we beat the biblical three score and ten by a whole decade. This sense of satisfaction we ought to feel at having survived often gets obscured as we wallow in the downsides of aging, but it should continue to serve as a self-congratulatory milestone.

Let's face it, 80 is a hell of a lot of years. Try this on for size: someone who was 80 the year we were born (1934) would himself have been born in 1854 – six years before the Civil War began and Abe Lincoln made a name for himself! Add just two more of these 80 spans, and you're back in the 17th century (you know, the one where the years start with a "16").

Let's check in with Shakespeare and his seven ages of man (from the "All the world's a stage" soliloquy in *As You Like It*). I'd like to think that at 80 we're hanging on to the end of the fifth age ("the justice, in fair round belly with good capon lined. . . full of wise saws and modern instances"). But I'm afraid that, in the Bard's mind, we've eased into the "slipperd pantaloone" of the sixth age, whose youthful hose is much too wide for a "shrunk shank." (I refuse to acknowledge the seventh age – "second childishness. . . sans everything.")

In the upbeat piece I wrote upon turning 50, there's one segment I'd like to retract – my comparison of a man's age to the calendar months. I had June down for the good stuff that comes in your 30's, I awarded the prime month of August to the 50's, and so on. I'm ashamed to say, however, that I coupled the early 70's to November – a month to which, back then, I ascribed a "penultimate feeling" (when, in the songwriter's words, "the days dwindle down to a precious few"). I then compounded the insult by comparing 75 with December – "the final chapter," I called it, although with the throwaway caveat that "there may be plenty of good times to come." I don't even mention 80 – the chart just reads at that point:

<u>Month</u>	<u>Age</u>
December	75 – ?

Hey, Mr. Freund-at-50, I don't feel penultimate today, nor mired in a final chapter denoted by a question mark. If I could go back, I'd renegotiate the month allocation with my younger self – asking for 80 to be October, although probably accepting November by way of compromise.

However you slice it, though, there's one indisputable *minus* to turning 80 that balances the indisputable plus of simple survival: PSYCHOLOGICALLY, IT SUCKS! How did we get to be so old? Where did the years go?

But enough of these extremes. Once you get beyond the perimeter assessments of simple survival and psychologically-it-sucks, the state of play at 80 becomes complex, making it difficult to generalize. Each of us arriving at this juncture has a quite personal response to the event, and even for a single individual there are competing factors. I'll offer you my own

take on things – recognizing that while some contemporaries may find themselves in general accord, others are likely to be sprinkled all along the reaction spectrum.

MORTALITY

For me, the big difference between 80 and prior milestone birthdays was summed up in a quote I saw recently in *The New York Times* from Gloria Steinem (a contemporary), who said something along the lines of, “80 isn’t about aging; it’s about mortality.”

Ugh! But much as I try to disregard stuff like this, it’s a reality that hovers out there, refusing to be ignored – even when I’m feeling full of beans.

One of my college classmates put it best. A little while back, we lost three prominent members of the class in the span of about a month. Outside the church after the third service, I asked my classmate, “What’s your take on all this – what does it mean for the rest of us?” His answer was prompt and very much to the point: “Well, we may not be in the batter’s box, but we’re sure as hell on deck.”

Every month now, our college alumni magazine notes several more passings. In the program for the recent annual memorial service held in the university chapel, the number of classmate names listed had grown significantly.

It’s not just the quantity of the losses, but the quality too. Last year I had the sad task of delivering a eulogy at the funeral of my life-long friend, Bill Silver. We’d been together in the fourth grade, and Bill had become an integral part of our family over the years. So often nowadays we find ourselves bemoaning his loss – especially when something comes up that we know he’d have been fascinated by, or some question arises that he (with his encyclopedic knowledge) could have answered in a flash.

It’s also about losing shared memories. Each of us has many vivid recollections from prior years of events that were shared with just one person who was also present – and when he or she goes, so does the sharing – and perhaps, ultimately, the memories. I became most aware of this when

my first wife, Barbro, passed away two years ago. The tensions of our divorce had softened into an amicable relationship; we met for lunch periodically, where we shared some non-controversial pleasant memories that only we two could recall. Now, I have to revisit these past times on my own.

I manage to deal constructively with the passing of others. For instance, I come in touch with mortality all too often at the three senior citizen centers where I play piano for weekly or monthly singalongs. (My assistant Raymond takes videos of these sessions on special occasions such as Christmas.) From time to time, one of the regulars doesn't show up for a while, and then we get the bad news of his or her demise. For two of the more prominent soloists who passed away recently, I created and narrated DVD's of their notable performances, for showings to the group and their families. (I also did this for two other members – both still with us – upon their 100th birthdays.) These are sentimental undertakings, filled with poignancy, but the warm receptions they receive makes the effort definitely worthwhile.

On the other hand, *one's own* mortality is a subject I find quite difficult to deal with. Pertinent subjects like whether or not to pull the plug, or burial vs. cremation, or what comes after, are not my cup of tea. I'm roughly in the same camp as my son Tom was at age 12, when I asked him how he was doing in terms of his spiritual education in Sunday School. "Dad," he said, "when they start to talk about those things, I've just got to get up and walk around."

I have a good friend (a contemporary) who is much more comfortable in these worlds as a believer in Karma and reincarnation. "When you realize," he says, "that the concept of 'spirit' is not just an abstraction, then all fear of death dissolves." And here's how he puts his current attitude. "I won't say I yearn for death. I'd like to remain alive as long as I can be useful to my family and other human beings. But, in a way, I am looking forward to it."

That seems like an enviable way to approach the subject; and I'm sure that many others find comfort in the teachings of their religion. For me, though, so far it's still a matter of getting up and walking around – I've obviously got some work to do here.

Meanwhile, buoyed by the fact that my mother, Marcy Freund, lived to a ripe 105, I like to assert, “Hey, I’ve got 25 good ones left in the genes” (ignoring my father’s untimely passing at 67), and thus to put off having to deal with this morbid stuff for the time being.

I felt some support here from a recent *Times* article entitled, “Get to 100 and Life Actually Doesn’t Feel So Bad.” It begins with the revelation (surprising to me) that according to population projections, half the people born after the year 2000 will live to at least 100. Apparently recent studies indicate that once people approach 100, “they tend to have a very positive attitude toward life” – higher levels of satisfaction than those experienced decades younger. Why so? The research professor speculates that people in their 60’s and 70’s haven’t fully adjusted to their impairments, whereas the very old have reached a state of acceptance. So that’s what we have to look forward to. . . . And I liked one elder’s advice for aspiring centenarians: make a lot of friends, and make sure some of them are younger so you don’t outlive them all.

But two recent occurrences exposed the fragility of my deal-with-it-later attitude. First, I found myself treating 80 as a sufficient milestone to pull together in a five-disc CD the best recordings I’d made in prior years – to create a retrospective collection of songs that I’m sending to my friends. And I’ve started in doing the same for my photographs and writings. What’s up, Jim? Well, I must have heard an inner voice itching to state publicly: here’s what I accomplished up to 80. The unspoken penumbra, however, was my sense of not really knowing what lies ahead, and wanting to get this done while I still have all my marbles.

The other matter involves an insurance policy I’ve had for years, payable upon death to my sons. The level premium for the most recent decade has been large but affordable. But, as my agent told me recently, that level comes to an end next year; and the new level going forward is an unaffordable multiple of the old. He showed me the different numbers – all high, but significantly increasing with time – for 10 years, 15 years and 20 years out. If I really figure I’ll live to 105 like Mom, then I need to look at that sky-high 20-year premium – but is it realistic to do so? I haven’t yet decided how to handle this, but I promise to do so by the end of this essay.

AGE DISCLOSURE

A recurring issue as the years pass – but with extra resonance at 80 – is whether or not to reveal one’s age to others. Attitudes on this range across the spectrum – from those who don’t give an inch (“It’s none of their goddamn business”) to those who flaunt their longevity for all to see. In the middle are those who lie about their age (generally tending downward) and those who’ll admit to the accurate number if questioned, but don’t otherwise trot it out.

For many years, my mother was fiercely protective about her age, and would grow furious if she thought I had told anyone how old she really was. If someone asked about her age, she would reply with relish, “I’m as old as my little pinky,” wagging the fifth finger at her interrogator.

Once I took her to the hospital for some tests, but had to take a call while she was being checked in. Upon returning, I looked at the nurse’s computer screen and noticed she had inserted a 1917 date of birth for Mom. Assuming it was a bookkeeping mistake, I corrected it and then went over to tell Mom. “They got your birthdate wrong and put 1917 instead of 1907.” She replied with vigor, “They don’t have to know how old I am” – at which point I realized this was no mere clerical error.

And then, as she neared the century mark, her age became a badge of honor. One day I was receiving a community award for leading singalongs at Goddard Riverside Senior Center, and had invited Mom to the program. In my acceptance remarks, I paid tribute to her as the woman who had started me on the piano and made me practice as a boy, concluding with, “I know she’ll kill me for saying it, but Mom, who’s sitting right over there, will be turning 100 this Christmas.” At that point, the entire room of several hundred people stood up and applauded loudly. When I returned to our table – worried over how Mom would react to my disclosure – she smiled sweetly and said, “Did *you* ever get a standing ovation?” From then on, I would hear her asking people, “Do you know how old I am?” – and then proudly trotting out the big number in response to their invariably lower guesses.

So, if you’re a contemporary, where do you fall on this disclose-or-deny continuum? I’m not embarrassed to say – as you’ve undoubtedly guessed from the fact I’m writing and distributing this article – that I’ve been volunteering the information to my friends and acquaintances. (I’m not,

however, stopping strangers on the street to report the news.) As for why I'm doing this, I suppose it's that I'm proud to be belying my age by engaging in various activities associated with younger men.

As for the reactions I receive, everyone purports to be overcome with disbelief. "You, 80? No way!" After I verify the number, they say something like, "Well, haven't you heard? – 80 is the new 65." I'm flattered by these responses but realize they may stem less from genuine surprise than diplomatic nicety. (If I had any doubt that everyone already knows my age, it was dispelled when, as I was writing this section, the phone rang and a voice greeted me with, "Hello – you've been selected to receive a medical alert device. . . .")

By the way, although signs at airport security assure me that at my age I'm entitled to keep on my shoes when passing through the checkpoint, I still take them off and deposit them in a bin for x-ray inspection. I tell myself that the reason for this is that if I were to be questioned about my footwear, the I.D. containing my proof of age would still be wending its way through the x-ray machine. But I suspect the real reason, deep down, is that I resent the implication of the age exception – namely, that someone of my advanced years is too old to be dangerous.

HEALTH

Much of how we deal with life at 80 has to do with the issue of health – an unsurprising observation perhaps, but one that was brought home to me recently with some force.

When 2014 rolled around, I started thinking about writing this piece. Back in January, I felt on top of the world – no shrunk shank for me. My contemporaries may have been ailing in various respects, but I was full of physical vigor – still skiing, playing tennis several times a week (mostly singles), working regularly with a trainer, exuding lots of energy, and so on. My attitude toward the impending eight-o was really quite positive.

Barbara and I had scheduled our annual ski trip for early March and were looking forward to it. I thought my quads could use a little strengthening, so one day in February I got on two machines I'd never used before at the gym – the kind where your legs push and lift against resistance.

Big mistake. . . . By the next day, my lower back had gone into spasm, the pain shooting down through the buttocks to my left leg. I had to use a cane to get around and was in such discomfort I could barely sleep.

So, I went to have an MRI. (It was done, by the way, at a so-called “stand-up” MRI facility – although in fact I was seated – that’s much better, claustrophobia-wise, than the lying down variety.) It showed all the historical disc bulges, spinal stenosis and scoliosis that, like locusts, make a painful reappearance every 17 years or so, when I do something stupid like get on those machines.

(I must pause here to voice a complaint against the terminology used by doctors. If there’s one phrase I hate, it’s that I have a “degenerative” disease. It sounds to me like an indictment – the depraved patient having committed some immoral act that goes much deeper than a merely aggravated physical condition. . . .)

Anyway, I went into physical therapy, chugged some pills stronger than Advil, and gradually recovered. We had to cancel the ski trip – it’s the first winter we’ve ever missed out – and I stayed off the tennis courts for several months. But I’m free of pain, pretty mobile and sleeping well – hopeful (knock wood) that this problem will return underground for at least another decade.

But here’s what I took away from the experience (over and above the temptation to re-title this essay, “A Funny Thing Happened to Me on My Way to 80. . .”). While I was ailing, not only was my mobility affected, but I found it hard to sustain all the non-physical activities I’d been doing. My prime focus was on getting into as comfortable a position as possible, which interfered with trying to write or read or play the piano, etc. With discomfort hogging the scene, I came to realize the unremarkable fact that had escaped me up to then – that when we hit 80, good health is the most essential of all positive attributes.

I know my back problem doesn’t compare in seriousness to the ailments that so many of my contemporaries have suffered from – strokes, heart attacks, cancer, spine surgery, joints that need replacement, the onset of dementia, and so on. But even though I’m putting this behind me, it has produced an increased self-awareness of the fragility of my ongoing physical

well-being. The prideful hubris of last January is gone; I'm now painfully aware that bad stuff can rise up and bite you any day. And the questions arise: How hard should I run for that ball my opponent has angled toward the sideline? How will I feel about stepping onto skis next winter (as I plan to do)? Health trumps all – which is probably why it's the dominant topic of conversation when we fellow geezers get together.

While writing this piece, I got a small taste of what may lie ahead (but hopefully not). Shortly before embarking on a much-anticipated trip to the West Coast, I twisted my left knee during a routine tennis outing. It swelled up, producing weakness and a reduced range of motion – and I found myself shuffling along and dependent on a cane. Still, I was determined to proceed with my planned excursion and did so.

Bottom line, it worked out all right, but I had trouble adjusting to the role of a partial invalid. Everything appeared more complicated and time-consuming than usual – I seemed to be operating in slow motion. Staircases were a problem, uphill climbs a real chore.

But what most fascinated me was how much I came to resemble an old-fashioned 80-year old (you know, the kind that existed before 80 became the new 65). When you shuffle along tapping a cane, people feel sorry for you. They get out of your way, they encourage you to “go first”, they offer you their seat – and if you should chance to drop something, they jump in and pick it up. I don't recall having experienced this previously and found it somewhat off-putting. Don't they know I'm really a splendid physical specimen with only a minor temporary patella problem?

So when anyone who knew me asked what was up – and in some cases, even before they inquired – I was quick to implicate tennis as the culprit. I guess this was my way of underlining how fit I *usually* was and implying I'd soon be that way again.

You know the standard greeting when people meet or speak on the phone: “How ya doin'?” To which the standard response is, “Fine – how're you?” – and now the two of you can get down to business. Except if you encountered me on that trip, and got an unexpected extended reply: “Not so great – I've got this tennis knee. . . .” This typically led to a medical/therapy interlude which delayed matters for several minutes, while my greeter was

probably thinking to himself: “That’s the last time I ask anyone how they’re doing.”

On the other hand, I can’t deny that my cane caper led to perks and prerogatives that were not to be sneezed at. The best part took place at the airports, where I was whisked in a wheelchair from curbside check-in to the departure gate – including a go-to-the-front-of-the-endless-line shortcut through security. At first, I wondered whether the authorities might be suspicious that I was faking it – the cane being just a useful prop to justify riding in style. But no – and here’s where being almost 80 and looking the part came in handy – my bona fides were never questioned. And I’ll always remember the stout lady across the aisle who, without my even asking, offered to lift my heavy carry-on bag into the overhead rack – an offer, I’m ashamed to say, I gratefully accepted without hesitation.

But enough of that – the fact is I can’t wait to shed the cane, lift my own luggage, and spend a half-hour going through security. (Admittedly, though, I may reconsider this touch of brio a few years from now.)

A related problem is the health of a spouse or other close family member, which can be such a trying experience. In recent years, the wife of one of my friends had Alzheimer’s, which kept getting worse. One day, while telling some acquaintances (including my friend) about what I had to put up with at home – five dogs (seven on weekends), and two cats – one of them said to me, “You’re a saint”. To which my friend with the ailing wife responded, with pain in his eyes, “Jim, you don’t know what sainthood is.”

By the time we reach 80, each of us knows someone who suffered from, or is currently coping with Alzheimer’s or some other form of dementia. It’s so sad. And none of us can deny having wondered whether this is what’s in store for us – especially right after we’ve forgotten something we should have remembered, or repeated ourselves, or lost our way, or misplaced possessions.

When my wife Barbara comes into contact with someone who’s deep in the throes of Alzheimer’s (the real thing, not just imagined), she’ll often say, “If I ever get that way, just take me in the backyard and shoot me.” To which I reply with something inane like, “There’s no backyard in our apartment,” and we move on.

Fortunately, there's a big gap between forgetting someone's name or a familiar phone number and the degree of dementia that so affects the quality of life as to evoke contemplation of the backyard. (And, by the way, my Barbara rarely forgets a name, and holds in her memory the floor plans of every co-op apartment building in Manhattan.)

For me, the ultimate issue is less clear-cut. I enjoy living so much that it's hard for me to envision situations dire enough as to make me want to bow out voluntarily. But, then again, I realize that if I went way downhill, I wouldn't be in the best position to decide whether I'd had a change of heart on the subject.

So I've devised my own test, which I've conveyed to my wife on more than one occasion. If I'm really losing it, Barbara, seat me at the piano and place my hands on the keys. If within 30 seconds you hear something resembling those two B-flats that kick off "Blue Moon," then keep me around. (And by the way, I'm charging the rest of you with the sober responsibility, assuming I pass the "Blue Moon" test, of *not* letting her take *me* out into the backyard, assuming we had one, at least for a while longer.)

PERSONAL FINANCE

The issue of personal finance, from the vantage point of turning 80, involves at least two interrelated considerations:

- How are things going right now? Am I able to do what I want (within reasonable limits), or do I feel uncomfortable constrictions?
- How will things be for the remainder (duration uncertain) of my (our) years? Does a positive response to the first consideration (I'm doing now just what I want) presage possible trouble in the years ahead?

Barbara and I are in pretty good shape on this front – not opulent but comfortable – and (at least on the surface) this seems to be the case with most of our friends; so that's the viewpoint from which my examination of life at 80 emanates. But I realize how much this factor can affect one's views on the subject – how difficult it would be to feel positive about 80 if you're

under a lot of financial pressure today or facing future economic uncertainties.

RETIREMENT

I've written a lot in past pieces about the subject of retirement, so I don't want to dwell on it here. I'm still playing piano for singalongs at three senior citizen centers, at the American Cancer Society's Hope Lodge, and (this year) for three different classes at Princeton Reunions; I take and edit photos, try to write readable fiction, remain active in selecting candidates for public service fellowships through my Princeton class – enough said.

But there is one respect in which my personal view of retirement differs from what it was at 75 – although not in the way you might have thought.

I retired from the practice of law in 1996, when I was 62 years old. Back then, this was a young age for a lawyer to call it quits – I was one of the first Skadden partners to do so. (Now, some are out the door as young as 55.) I had what I considered the two essential reasons for voluntary early retirement – I was no longer getting a kick out of what I was doing professionally, and there were other things I really wanted to take on.

It worked out quite well for me. For over a dozen years, I managed to fill my time with a variety of pleasurable and gratifying activities. One of them – something that kept me in touch with skills developed during my working years (which I consider an essential element of a constructive retirement) – was mediating business disputes. At 75, I characterized this as “demanding work that engenders a real sense of satisfaction when I'm able to help the disputants reach a reasonable compromise resolution.” But I didn't actively seek out the assignments and was satisfied just handling several mediations each year on an *ad hoc* basis.

Then, shortly after my 75th birthday, I was appointed by the Federal Bankruptcy Court in New York City as one of the three mediators of disputes arising out of the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers – the largest one ever, I'm told. The cases all involved derivative securities (swaps) that were terminated when Lehman filed for bankruptcy in 2008. Lehman was generally “in the money” on these, but the amounts owed to Lehman by the

myriad parties on the other side of the thousands of trades were hotly disputed. Our job was to help Lehman and its counterparty in each case reach an accommodation amount.

Well now, five years later (and with three more mediators added by the court), these cases are still going on. Although I haven't kept score, I've handled something close to 50 of them. Some periods are busier than others, but I usually average around 30-40 hours of my time a month. So, it's not full-time – and I still have lots of days to do other things – but it's a significant block of time and a recurring responsibility. At this juncture, I can't say that I'm really retired.

It has been a fulfilling – albeit often frustrating – experience. Along the way, I got so caught up in the process of mediating that I wrote a book on the general subject (not about the Lehman experience) called *Anatomy of a Mediation*. This gig won't last forever, though, and I'm likely to have a new take on being a working stiff when I sit down five years from now to focus on turning 85.

In my essay at 75, I made the point (which I still endorse) that retirement is a “package deal” – a balancing of positive and negative factors. And I concluded that the toughest aspect of retirement is giving up the thing you're best at and most known for. The sense of no longer being needed, the absence of accomplishment, the lack of recognition, approval, even adulation – all this and more – definitely tests your self-esteem. You need to develop a new challenge.

By the way, if you're looking for adulation, don't opt to be a mediator. Even when you're successful in getting both sides to agree to a compromise resolution – and I am much of the time (but not always) – the reaction of the parties involved is rarely enthusiastic. Rather, it's this kind of thing: “I'm going further than what's reasonable in agreeing to this number, but it's just barely better than the alternative of continuing the battle in court.” No one is jumping up and clicking his heels, and the “thanks for your service” you receive is often perfunctory.

But, as I said at 75, you can't let your self-esteem be dependent on the praise or positive reaction of others. If adulation has been your sole source of validation, you'll be in trouble. At the ripe old age of 80, we should be

able to judge for ourselves how well we're doing. Or, as Shakespeare put it, "Go to your bosom / knock there / and ask your heart what it doth know."

MY "READING DIET" REVISITED

Over the years, people have asked me how I manage to get so many things done. One reason I've often given is that I don't read as much as I'd like to.

For so many of us, reading a book is the most pleasurable of pursuits, demanding little from the reader except his attention. And if what you're reading is worthwhile, you don't get tired of it – you can go on for hours. So, I've concluded that in order to accomplish stuff in other more demanding (albeit less pleasurable) activities such as writing, you have to ration the time devoted to reading in order to free up the necessary hours. Until recently, I've been able to do just that – to keep myself on what might be called a "reading diet."

But now at 80, all that may be changing for me. Any past success I achieved in reading forbearance didn't reckon with this gizmo called Kindle.

I'm the kind of reader who seldom stays exclusively with one or two books. Rather, I dip into one, read a few chapters, then switch over to several others for a similar brief stint, then back to the first one for a further dip. Over the years, I've bought my share of hard cover books and paperbacks as they were published or came to my attention, even though I knew deep down how unlikely it was I'd get around to reading them soon. Mostly, they piled up on my bookshelves, requiring some effort to dig them out – thereby serving my subliminal intent of wanting to *have* each book, but not really motivated to take the time to read it right away.

But then along came Kindle – beguiling me with two irresistible aspects:

First, there's the instant gratification of reading the review of a new book that sounds good, and then – in less than a minute after making a few simple taps on the screen – having it appear on my Kindle ready for perusal.

Second, there's the delight of knowing I can stockpile dozens of books that I'd like to read in this one small gizmo I can tote anywhere. And that's just what I'm starting to do in earnest – peruse a chapter here, a section there, switch between fiction (novel, short story, play) and non-fiction (history, biography, “how to” books) – it's a ball.

Please don't let the left side of my brain find out I'm taking delicious covert pleasure in such breaches of my reading diet. It's too early to tell yet, but this may be one of the ways that turning 80 will affect me going forward – more input, less output. We'll see.

THE ELUSIVE TUMMY DIET

Most of what I want to accomplish, assuming it's within reason, I'm able to do. But there's one tantalizing item that has so far proved too formidable to conquer – namely, losing 15 pounds, the bulk of which is located in the familiar rubber tire locale.

For one of my birthdays several years ago, Barbara's present was to pay for my first visit to a diet doctor. (It reminded me of the proverbial husband-to-wife unappreciated anniversary gift of a vacuum cleaner.) But although I went to see this guy regularly and tried to follow his regimen, the advances I made would invariably be followed by setbacks.

It's not that I'm ignorant of what I should be eating, and I don't gorge myself with sweets and such. But I seem to lack the necessary willpower to pass up tasty slices of bread, cut down on wine, eat smaller portions of steak – that kind of thing. I'm in the thrall of an “I'm entitled” attitude that has magnified as I've neared 80 – why should I deprive myself? Rather, I find I'm frequently “giving myself a treat” for finishing a project or starting a new one or celebrating some event – and many of the resultant treats find their way into my mouth, from whence they journey south.

Sure, I make all the usual arguments to myself – thinner is healthier, I'll look better and run faster on the tennis court, those old trousers banished to the rear of the closet will once again fit – but when I'm sitting in a first-class Italian restaurant, waiting impatiently for the appetizer to be served, that basket of fresh bread is simply irresistible.

That's a major problem for me – the plethora of fine food coming my way. Barbara is a superb cook on weekends, and our housekeeper Gloria does wonders in the kitchen during the week; NYC restaurants are top-notch; even takeout is enticing. If instead I were relegated to eating institutional food (like we had at school or in the Navy), I'm sure I could take off some weight through an absence of temptation; but with these tasty morsels on my plate, how can I send half of it back to the kitchen uneaten? (I know, I know, take the other half home in a doggy bag – but the delayed gratification of day-old pasta just doesn't compare to the initial surge.)

I realize what I need to do – persuade myself as to the tremendous sense of accomplishment I'd feel having shed the weight and kept it off. But so far, this hasn't happened, and 80 seems a tough age to succeed in substituting deprivation for rewards.

THE REVOLUTION IN PERSONAL TECHNOLOGY

If I had turned 80 a generation ago and were writing about it back then, this section wouldn't have been included. But the recent technological developments in personal gadgetry simply cannot be ignored, even for an octogenarian.

Personally, I was slow getting going into the computer age. While still practicing law in the '90s, I may have been the only attorney to ignore the module the firm placed in all offices. As for phones, while I didn't go as far as my mother (who, until the end last year, kept a rotary dial phone in her foyer closet), I never considered myself a prime mover in the cellphone direction (although Barbara likes to remind me about when I used to lug around a huge battery to keep some relic device functioning).

But all that changed after I retired in '96. I became (barely) computer literate, especially for photography; began to rely on a (now compact) cellphone; discovered email (while still wary of texting); and ultimately found my way into IPODs, tablets and such.

You may hear me complain about the difficulties of gaining traction in the often counter-intuitive digital arena, and bemoan the enormous dexterity gap between late learners and your average second-grader, but I am now a convert – this stuff is terrific, even for us geezers.

For instance, you know all these piano and vocal recordings I make? The musical input of these CD's (which, in terms of audio, if not content, sound like they were done in a studio) all take place in my living room through the magic of microphones plugged into something that's plugged into a laptop computer. Now, to be sure, my assistant Raymond (who's very good at this stuff) is operating the thing, and all I have to do is plunk the piano keys – but without the computer recording program, forget it.

Likewise, the combination of digital cameras and the computer “darkroom” has been a real boon to taking and editing photos. The ability to see what you just shot (in case the subject's eyes were closed); the little card that replaces film and holds a thousand shots; the ability to shoot color and black & white with the same camera and card, to adjust the “film” speed to accommodate indoor and outdoor lighting – what progress!

Years ago, I put in a darkroom at our Connecticut weekend retreat, where I processed black & white shots. It was tedious, but I got a kick out of watching the print slowly emerge – almost magically – from the chemical solution. As the digital age gained traction, Barbara wanted to convert the darkroom into another bathroom, but I held my ground. I had long envisioned taking my pre-teen grandchildren into “my place” and introducing them to the miracle of developing photographic images.

But the last time I printed pictures in the darkroom, instead of marveling at the image coming slowly to life in the pan, I found myself tapping my foot and mumbling, “This . . . is . . . taking . . . a . . . long . . . time.” And as for my granddaughters, they've never set foot inside the room – and if they did, instead of gazing with awe at the print taking form in the chemicals, they'd probably be saying, “Hey, why are you going through all that? We can do this in two minutes – and with better results – on our computer.”

And they'd be right. I was never that good in the darkroom anyway; and the computer's ability to remove shadows on faces and other foreground objects, to brighten the image, to eliminate red eye and other dross, to straighten the horizon and (with such ease) crop out what's not vital to the picture – *that's* what's magical.

(But I'm still not giving in to Barbara's unreasonable demand to install an extra toilet . . .).

I have a personal website (jimfreund.com) that contains my essays, stories, pictures and piano albums. Cell phones with all the apps are fantastic, and (I have to admit) also take very presentable photos which can be sent to friends on the spot. Email is amazing, and the IPAD contains so many possibilities – including the games I like to play such as backgammon, sudoku, kakuro, ken-ken and solitaire.

It's almost enough to make one not hark back to the good old days. . . .

80TH YEAR NEGATIVES

I had a section in the last such piece I wrote called “Some 75-Year-Old Negatives.” Many of the items still bother me – like the seeming inability to locate specific possessions of mine at the time I want them to appear. Or how everything (however mundane) seems to take a lot longer to do nowadays. But I won't burden you with fresh details on these – and certain other subjects, like memory loss, are alluded to elsewhere in these pages.

But excess noise levels – ah, there's one that I'm more cranky about with each passing year. At weddings and other celebrations, the amped-up dance music drives me out of the room. At trendy New York restaurants, the cacophony of voices not only impedes conversation but undercuts enjoyment of the food (albeit not sufficiently to diminish my diet-breaking intake). I'm grateful that my hearing remains unimpaired at 80, but I can't abide the frequent assaults on its well-being.

I'm more impatient now (or was I always impatient?). I find it tougher to roll with the punches. Some people (e.g., Barbara) get impatient with the pace at which *other people* (e.g., me) are operating. I confess to some of that, but my primary impatience is directed at machines and other artifacts of life that refuse to operate as they should, thereby evoking a lusty string of four-letter words aimed in their direction. (As for my lack of patience when it comes to the barking of four-legged critters around the house, I'm going to pass – thereby preserving amicable relations with my rescuer wife.) I frankly don't see this trait improving in the years ahead.

Here's something I've noticed on the verge of 80 – how often I'm the oldest guy in the room. Sure, it was always the case when I attended Barbara's high school reunions, but lately I'm noticing this more and more – at parties, sporting events, lectures and so on. Now that I think of it, this really isn't so much a negative – sometimes, as on a ski slope, I even take quiet pride in the realization – but I bet this is something my peers are encountering a lot of lately.

And, by the way, I haven't failed to notice how easy it is to claim my senior discount at movies and sporting events. I'm apt to wonder why the ticket-taker doesn't mumble, "Hey, this young-looking stud is definitely faking it" – and then demand to see a birth certificate. But sadly, no one has Won't somebody card me, please?

WHAT LIES AHEAD?

Assuming I don't give in to that urge to just sit in a rocking chair perusing my Kindle, I'll likely continue to press ahead with the things I love to do – making music, photographing, and writing. In fact, I have some new wrinkles in mind.

In the music area, I'm going to hone my piano improvising skills– not lean so much on the notes of the tune. I'll play more of my other two instruments, vibraphone and harmonica – perhaps, through computer magic, recording duets between them and my piano. And I want to write songs – the words and the music – something I did a little of years ago but have neglected during recent decades (although I recently renovated my 30-year-old upbeat ditty for the present occasion, retitled "79.9").

In photography, I think it's time to take some chances, be a little more offbeat, shoot on the diagonal, whatever. (Maybe I've been *on* beat too long in various areas. . . .) I also like making documentary videos and plan to expend more effort to improve in this area.

As for writing, I had expected to advance from short stories to novellas and maybe even a novel, but it hasn't happened. Still, this is something I'm going to think about if the right subject matter presents itself.

So, there's no shortage of possibilities. But I do think that past 80 I'm likely to re-examine one aspect of this – the relationship between productivity and quality. It strikes me that I may have been guilty of unconsciously equating the two – i.e. operating on the implicit assumption that by striving to turn out a lot of product I've thereby created works of real quality. But the two concepts aren't necessarily linked. In the years ahead, I might find myself aiming for better quality on less production – or even find a quality experience in some non-productive pursuits, such as reading (there goes the “diet”. . .).

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

As I'm sure most of you would agree, a prime pillar of happiness as we age comes in the form of family and friends. This happens to be an area in which I've been most fortunate, so please indulge me while I pay appropriate tribute where it's due.

Barbara and I enjoy wonderful extended families with lots of meaningful relationships. From the outset, the Fox-Hilton clan – Marjorie, Joe, Alexis, Ali, Anita and Al – took me into their inner circle as no mere in-law, but always as one of the gang. I stay in regular touch with most of my cousins. Younger generations are getting into the act (Kate's a good example) and providing new joy.

I'm enthusiastic about my warm relations with sons Erik and Tom. We share good times, reminisce about joyous moments from the old days, play music together, also tennis and backgammon. I'm supportive where I can be helpful, and from time to time they actually seek some counsel from the old guy. And we conclude most of our frequent phone conversations with a mutual chorus of, “I love you.”

Each son has sired a daughter – Tom's Delilah and Erik's Paige – and the boys are exemplary fathers. The girls (now 11 and 8) are bright, pretty, warm, and utterly delightful. My times with them are a real tonic, and I feel their warmth toward me is genuine. The sole problem is geography – that these treats can only be savored on a part-time basis. I wish they lived down the block, where I could take more advantage of my good fortune in being a grandfather to these terrific young women, and perhaps feel like I'm

contributing to their maturation – something that’s difficult to do when the time spent together is limited.

But a *wife* is both a companion for all seasons and a full-time commitment. Barbara Fox and I will be celebrating our 30th wedding anniversary in January – and all I can say is that it gets better each year. The woman is a real dynamo – managing her real estate brokerage firm and handling major residential transactions, rescuing abandoned dogs and cats while tending her own menagerie, nourishing her family, playing tennis and skiing with me, and so on. But, oh boy, with all that, does she ever take loving and supportive care of her guy. The Fox is so consistent – none of those highs and lows that can bedevil other unions – I always know where she stands. And such fun to be with – we’re laughing together and reminiscing and planning all the time. And in such good shape. . . and I find her so attractive. . . . Negatives? Well, I’m not happy about her predilection for throwing out my old magazines. . . . Anyway, you can bet that Barbara is going to do her best to keep me youthful – she simply won’t allow me to wither.

As for friends, I feel blessed – they form an indispensable and disparate multitude. Some of the closest date back to high school and college, with the relationship refreshed each year. Others have been more recent additions – a number of them through Barbara’s contacts. They’re a healthy mix of men and women, contemporaries and younger folk, New Yorkers and geographic outliers. When we get together, we pick up right where we left off months ago. I make a real effort to reach my friends through the annual year-end package I send out to 800-plus recipients; and while many don’t acknowledge the outreach, I’m hopeful that this nevertheless serves to keep the relationship alive.

And, of course, I should acknowledge the invaluable assistance I receive from a variety of people – at the forefront, my invaluable assistant Raymond, our housekeeper Gloria and her helper Henry, my secretary Pauline and her predecessor Ann, Barbara’s driver Gent, the dedicated women (Remy, Jane and Angella) who cared for my mom, and a host of others.

In facing up to aging, I recommend these words of General Douglas MacArthur, which my mother introduced me to some years ago as representative of her philosophy of life:

“People grow old only by deserting their ideas. Years may wrinkle the skin, but to give up interest wrinkles the soul . . . You are as young as your faith, as old as your doubts; as young as your self-confidence, as old as your fear; as young as your hope, as old as your despair. In the central place of every heart there is a recording chamber; so long as it receives messages of beauty, hope, cheer and courage, so long are you young. When . . . your heart is covered with the snows of pessimism and the ice of cynicism, then and only then are you grown old – and then indeed, as the ballad says, you just fade away.”

As for yours truly, my favorite song on the subject – surpassing even “Young at Heart” and “You Make Me Feel So Young” – is Bob Dylan’s “Forever Young,” which closes with these stirring lines that summarize my approach toward life: *“May your hands always be busy / may your feet always be swift / may you have a strong foundation / when the winds of changes shift / May your heart always be joyful / may your song always be sung / and may you stay / forever young.”*

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Oh, by the way, in terms of the life insurance I mentioned earlier, here’s the conclusion I’ve come to: I have to cut down on the amount of coverage (the premium payable is just too daunting), but I’M EXTENDING THE POLICY FOR 20 YEARS UNTIL I HIT 100! (After that, my boys are on their own. . . .)