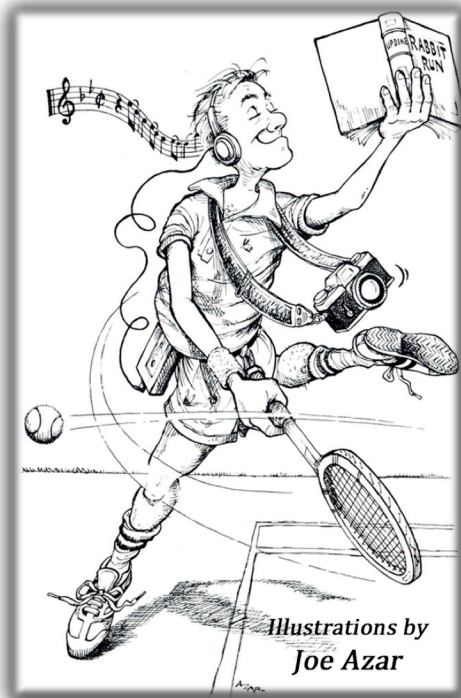


# 85 and counting...

by *Jim Freund*





## 85 AND COUNTING . . . .

by Jim Freund

85! – and I ask myself: What the hell is this erstwhile callow lad doing here on the verge of this venerable juncture?

Well, I reply, better to be an old codger than the alternative . . . .

For a long while, I've been trying to give meaning to the passage of time. I was 46 when I wrote my first such piece as President of the Princeton Class of 1956, celebrating our 25<sup>th</sup> reunion. I did an essay on turning 50, augmenting it with some added elements at 55. Although I didn't write anything at 60, I gave a speech to my college classmates about what was then on my mind. There was a major article about retirement (age 62) and other pieces on the subject, and viewed from ten years out; another piece for classmates at our 50<sup>th</sup> (age 71 for me); extended essays at ages 75 and 80; and subsequent articles for my 60<sup>th</sup> college's and 65<sup>th</sup> high school's reunions.

So, in ruminating on what it's been like to hit the big 8-5 in 2019, I'm not starting from scratch. Much of what I feel at this juncture emerged initially in earlier years, lending perspective to today's chore. In researching material for the memoir project I'm currently working on (discussed later in this piece), I've gone back to those prior writings to recall my periodic interests and concerns. So, although you may have previously heard some of what's contained in this piece, I'll try to assess the ways in which what's on my mind as I turn 85 may differ.

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For my 25<sup>th</sup> Princeton reunion book (at age 46), I wrote a letter to classmates that began in much the same tone as this one:

“TWENTY-FIVE – now that’s really absurd! Where did it go? I still have vivid memories of attending reunions as an undergraduate, dancing with the daughters of the superannuated twenty-fifth class . . . Can *they* now be *us*? Words like ‘inexorable’ and ‘time-worn’ intrude on our consciousness.”

By the end of the letter, though, I’d recovered sufficiently to close with: “It’s been one hell of a quarter-century but, as the man said, ‘You ain’t seen nothin’ yet!’”

For that reunion book, I wrote a piece containing my personal ten commandments – lessons of adulthood that I wished someone had offered me at graduation. Those axioms had a mid-life quality – don’t assume the accuracy of your current perspective, don’t rely on anyone to do it for you, don’t provide yourself with excuses for failure, and so on. (Actually, in retrospect my favorite is the fifth commandment: “Thou shalt not covet the ass of thy neighbor’s wife.”) I closed with this epitaph – something I still fully subscribe to today:

And while you hold these precepts dear,  
Through mire and through muck;  
Don’t underestimate the need  
To have a little luck.

In the personal section of the book – after announcing, “This may sound smug, but at 25 years out and counting, I’m quite pleased with where I sit,” and then launching into a recitation of why that was so – I ended on the following note, which really took me by surprise when I re-read it:

“So, at the risk of sounding morbid, I’ll say that if something unforeseen were to strike me down tomorrow, while I’d be mad as hell (since there’s so much more good living to enjoy), there would be no regrets, no

sense of unfinished business – which is (let me assure you) one fine way to feel.”

\* \* \*

Four years later I focused on turning 50. Although realizing that nothing happens on that date (you’re not suddenly eligible for anything, nor are you precluded from other activities) and the statistical significance is marginal, I felt the need to concede that “psychologically – the way it hits you in the head, without surveying the details – turning 50 is terrible.” It was a feeling that went back to our youth – to the sense then that anyone over 50 was an old man.

And – again much to my surprise today – here’s how I went on:

“Even worse, at 50 you’re suddenly conscious of your own mortality. It’s like 1 p.m. at a ski resort, when they start selling the half-day tickets; or comparable to crossing the Continental Divide – instead of looking up at a peak, you’re heading down the far slope. That’s the real problem – and it’s all in your head.”

Less dramatic were the negatives I listed – all of which, I must admit, have managed to survive for the next 35 years:

“Not everything’s perfect, of course. I exercise, but too irregularly. I try to watch my diet, but my willpower’s weak. I still hate traffic jams, feel claustrophobic if I don’t get an aisle seat, and have trouble with anything mechanical.”

Then I rallied – spurred on by what I felt Shakespeare must have had in mind for age 50 in his seven “ages of man” (from *As You Like It*) – the fifth stage: . . . “the justice, in fair round belly with good capon lin’d . . . full of wise saws and modern

instances . . . .” To counter the potential downward slope from the good place we were in, I used the analogy of a light bulb that glows right up to the moment it burns out, reminding readers that “Your most productive years may lie ahead.”

I did take a hard look at myself and liked what I saw – feeling young and doing young things, spurred on by having met my exuberant boomer wife-to-be Barbara Fox, “who had directed all her youthful energy at me like the nozzle of a hose – I was dancing to her beat and loving it.” I even wrote a song titled *49.9* – claiming that “the apprehension proved to be much worse than the event,” providing a number of positive examples, and closing on this upbeat note: “This next decade ahead should be the best I’ve ever had – I do intend to thrive.”

\* \* \*

And indeed, at least for the next half-decade, it lived up to its billing. Then, the year we all turned 60 (1994), my Princeton buddies asked me to address the topic at our annual class dinner. But 60 didn't come as readily as 50; and in the face of assorted aches and pains, I had to struggle to find a glass-half-full theme. The motif I came up with was, “Hey, we're entitled!” We've made it this far – now we're entitled to stay in the shower an extra few minutes in the morning, take a day off at the races, forget someone's telephone number or address, and so on. Pretty soon, the whole room was echoing the entitlement refrain.

By the way, the high point of that evening came after I opened up the floor to comments. A dozen volunteers rose to bitch about some sign of age that was bothering them – a cacophony of geriatric whining. Then my mother, who was in attendance, raised her hand to be recognized. “No, no,” I said, “forget it, Mom.” But others in the assemblage cried out, “Let her speak!” Marcy Freund got to her 87-year old feet, surveyed the superannuated crowd, and uttered this memorable put-down: “To me,” she said, “you're all children!”

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At the end of 1996, at age 62, I decided I'd had enough of lawyering and retired from my law firm. My career had been successful; I still had strong affirmative feelings toward my firm; I was eight year short of the firm's mandatory retirement age; and I received no financial incentive (such as is common nowadays) to retire early.

I retired because I observed a number of signs that collectively signaled me it was the right time to take that step. In an article I then wrote for the cover of *Business Law Today*, I spelled out what the editors called "A dozen surefire signs that you're ready to retire."

So, for instance:

- I found myself "lingering at home many mornings – putting off the moment of re-entry into the working world.
- I recognized a waning of intensity in my work and became concerned over a potential loss of effectiveness.
- I'd become tired of pursuing the agendas of other people and less respectful to clients than was merited.
- It became increasingly difficult to prod myself to hustle for new business.
- My M&A specialty was increasingly a young man's game, and I didn't want to become another Willy Loman.
- There was less opportunity to perform the mentoring role I'd found so rewarding.
- The ego gratifications were diminishing.
- There remained no particular new heights to conquer.

- I had a number of interests outside law – as a writer, musician and photographer.
- I sensed “the days dwindling down” and found myself initiating each day with a quick perusal of the Times’ obit page.

You get the picture . . . .

A series of follow-up articles on retirement followed at ages 63 and 64, in a regular column for the same periodical under the moniker of “From a distance . . . .” These displayed some aspects of where my mind was in those early years out on my own. Here’s a few of the matters I touched upon:

- Life was, as I’d expected, a lot less stressful; but “what I failed to foresee, though, was how less adept I would become at coping with the sporadic stressful circumstances (having nothing to do with the practice of law) that intrude into one’s life.”
- Barbara bought me that little book called *Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff – and it’s all small stuff*, encouraging me to master those precepts for increased calm. But what I found was that “the encrustation of 35 years of lawyering – during which the essence of being effective lay in your ability to successfully sweat the small stuff – is too resistant to change at this late date.”
- I lost all interest in corporate mergers and the gossipy doings of lawyers; rather, I became absorbed in the day-to-day machinations of Monicagate.
- I thoroughly enjoyed teaching a course at Fordham Law School on negotiating deals and disputes, which “kept me involved in just the kind of thing I’d been engaged in for 35 years – but without having to deal with clients!”



- I flirted with what my buddy Sherwin Kamin called “The Refuge of Age,” which he defined as, “When you reach a certain point in life, you can use your age to avoid things you don’t want to do and to excuse conduct for which you’d otherwise take flak” – things like carrying heavy baggage or packages, not remembering phone numbers, lack of energy. When challenged on the accuracy of the refuge, he said, “Remember, we’re not fooling ourselves. But at least until the stereotype dies, let the boomers carry the heavy bags.”

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The years of turning 65 and then 70 passed without my feeling the need to publicly note such landmarks, but I did write pieces to mark the occasion of our 50<sup>th</sup> college reunion (when I was 71) and the tenth anniversary of my retirement from the firm (age 72).

For the reunion book, I referred to the ten points of my 25<sup>th</sup> reunion piece and offered “ten fresh ones, garnered from my eldering experience over the past twenty-five years.” Notably, it started off with a true appreciation of the importance of good health – “a subject, incidentally, that I didn’t even allude to twenty five years ago.” But now, I realized, “Everything else – money, status whatever – takes a back seat.”

I paid tribute to the importance of wives; awakened to the realization that it feels good to “give something back”; noted that “It’s more important to be wise than smart”; cautioned all to never assume a damn thing; celebrated the risk-reward analysis and the significance of resolving disputes; and preached the “challenge” aspect of retirement – finding something to do yourself, involving skill and creating opportunities for further improvement, to balance the biggest negative about retirement – the jolt of voluntarily giving up the one thing you’re best at and most known for.

Having been retired from my law firm for almost a decade, I thought it important to convey this thought to retirees:

“Don’t be surprised at how quickly they forget. You’re not indispensable – even if you’re missed, you can be replaced. Back then, you were somebody – now, at times, you can feel like a nobody. As for any of that adulation that used to come your way, fuhgeddaboutit.”

I followed that up with this thought on self-esteem – something that has stuck with me through the years:

“Don’t fall into the trap of letting your self-esteem be dependent on the praise or positive reaction of others. Don’t overrate yourself on the basis of extravagant acclaim from those who may not really understand what you do, or what constitutes quality work, or who may have other motives for uttering sugarcoated words. On the other hand, don’t underestimate yourself, either on the basis of criticism received (although this may serve as a warning signal), or – and this one can sneak up on you – based on the absence of an anticipated favorable reaction when you think you’ve done something quite well. At your age, 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.”

In my 2006 article “A Retirement Scorecard”, I reflected at age 72 on what I’d discovered after a decade of being out of the office. To be sure, I “thoroughly enjoyed my unencumbered decade. But like most things in life, it’s not an unalloyed blessing . . .” I termed retirement “a package deal” – a “balancing of pros and cons . . . . For almost every positive, a correlative potential negative lurks around the corner.” Some examples included:

- The wonderful sense of freedom to do whatever you want is balanced by the absence of structure to your day – so “you have to schedule your activities each morning from scratch.”
- The flip side of the delightful absence of stress is that you spend a lot of time alone – “no one is chomping at the bit for an hour of your time” – and you must learn to be good company for yourself.
- You can do glamorous things, but “it’s still something of a shock to watch the dollars flowing out when there are no longer any dollars coming in.” And I pointed out “how hard it is to relinquish creative comforts that you and your spouse enjoyed when you were earning enough to afford them.”

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At 75, a special kind of milestone, I decided to take stock (although noting that virtually all my friends of similar age had let the occasion pass in much more stealthful fashion).

I began the piece with a personal anecdote highlighting an embarrassing short-term memory loss – a pesky feature of aging that was very much on my mind ten years ago. Today, of course, it still is with a vengeance – but it has become so routine that it’s now a subject of jokes. My current favorite (abbreviated) goes like this:

Ralph: “I’ve been thinking a lot about hereafter recently.”

Jim: “I didn’t realize you were that spiritual a guy . . . .”

Ralph: “It’s not that so much – it’s more like when I go from one room in the apartment to another, and I say to myself, ‘What am I *here after*?’”

I started out with a little historical perspective to show that 75 is one hell of a lot of years.

“Someone who was 75 the year we were born (1934) would himself have been born in 1859 – a year before the Civil War began! Why, back then his mama and daddy didn't even know that Abe Lincoln was going to be such a big hit. . . .”

At 85, the calculation goes back to 1849 – the start of the California gold rush.

Then I turned to what I called *The Big Plus* and *The Big Minus*. On the positive side, there was this indisputable plus to turning 75 for me and my chronological compatriots: WE MADE IT! The satisfaction over simply having survived had to be my first significant reaction. It was an achievement underscored by the disturbing reality that a growing number of contemporaries hadn't made the cut.

But if survival is the big *plus*, there was also one indisputable *minus* to turning 75. PSYCHOLOGICALLY, IT SUCKS! How did we get to be so old? Where did the years go? The very number was awesome, creating a problem in our heads and making us conscious of our mortality.

Here was an example I used to illustrate our advanced years. When my cousin and I were little kids, we used to spend some time with our grandmother, who certainly epitomized our concept of "old". One day we asked about her age. "Look at the Heinz catsup bottle," she said, "and you'll see." The label proudly proclaimed "57 varieties." So, back then 57 seemed almost ancient – and yet at 75, I found myself perched on the brink of an unwelcome reversal of the digits.

Shakespeare was no help – it was clear we'd passed from the fifth stage ("the justice, in fair round belly with good capon lin'd . . . full of wise saws and modern

instances") and eased into the "slipper pantaloons" of the sixth age, whose occupant's "youthful hose" is much too wide for a "shrunk shank".

I also apologized for one segment in my "turning 50" piece, comparing the ages of man 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 was ashamed to admit, 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."

Here's how I reacted to this:

"Hey, Mr. Whippersnapper Freund, I don't feel even a little bit penultimate today – let alone mired in a final chapter. If I could go back, I'd renegotiate the month allocation with my younger self – asking for September, although perhaps accepting October by way of compromise."

Ten years later, I'd still make a fuss, but probably settle for November . . . .

I concluded (and still feel) that much depends on how an individual stands in four key areas, which I then proceeded to assess myself on.

- Health – I'd made it to 75 in pretty good shape. Hey, even for those with a myriad of health issues, it beats the alternative. As someone said to me back then when I voiced that thought, "Yeah, you're mowing the lawn instead of looking at the root system."
- Family and Friends – obviously important, and I was pleased to score myself high on this.

- Financial – I could well understand how it would be hard to feel positive about "the golden years" when you're under a lot of financial pressure. The year just past (2008) had been an especially trying one to many people in that respect. Barbara and I endured those financial shocks to the system like everyone else, but as my good friend Fred Bacher likes to say, "It's not how much you've lost – it's how much you have left." So, my paean to 75 sprang from a satisfactory (albeit reduced) level of financial comfort, while recognizing how much this factor can affect one's views.
- Work, Retirement, Interests and Skills – And here I launched into an extended evaluation of retirement, which was going well for me. I left the practice of law relatively early and had now been retired for over a dozen years. I'd managed to fill my time with a number of mostly pleasurable and gratifying activities. Other retirees I'd encountered ran the gamut from enjoyment to satisfaction to boredom to unhappiness. As I'd said elsewhere, I considered retirement a "package deal," a balancing of positive and negative factors.

To counterbalance my generally positive tone on turning 75, I included some negatives (which still plague me today):

- A seeming inability to locate specific possessions of mine at the time I want them to appear.
- How everything (mundane stuff, not major projects) seemed to take a lot longer to do.
- The inability to stick to a diet and shave off the 15 extra pounds I didn't need.
- Short-term memory lapses – although the big stuff was still secure.

A prime reason I had a positive youthful outlook on 75 was that I was poised in space and time between two strong women who I loved dearly. At one extreme, there was my remarkable mother, still very much with us at 101; at the other was my wife, many years my junior, whose multiple activities and energy made me constantly strive to keep up (more on her later). Neither of these tenacious ladies allowed me to feel elderly for a minute.

In facing up to aging, I recommended these words of General Douglas MacArthur, which my mother introduced me to some years back as representative of her philosophy of life and which I still unequivocally endorse today:

"People grow old only by deserting their ideals. 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."

I then referred to what is still my favorite song on the subject – surpassing even *Young at Heart* and *You Make Me Feel So Young* – Bob Dylan's *Forever Young*, which closes with these stirring lines:

"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."

I was proud of the fact that at 75 I was still running on all cylinders – an appraisal that might be less valued in someone of 65 – and I didn't mind a bit who knew it. And if that came off as too self-congratulatory, I took comfort in the sentiment I'd heard voiced recently by the veteran cabaret singer, Marilyn Maye: "At this age, I'm too old to be humble."

Here was my final word on the subject:

"Maybe, it all comes down to a matter of expectations – i.e. how you feel about turning 75 might depend a lot on what you anticipated experiencing. If, for example, you expected plaudits and loud huzzahs, then their absence (which is virtually guaranteed) will disappoint you, causing a negative reaction. If, on the other hand, you've long dreaded the date, and then it comes and passes without any negative consequences, you may feel pleased. And if, like me, you had expected to be able to ski free (as used to be the case), get over it – just go claim your paltry senior discount and fork over the big bucks.

"And by the way, I was still waiting in vain for one of those ski lift or movie ticket-sellers to demand a birth certificate from this youthful-looking 75-year-old guy before agreeing to chop a few dollars off the fee . . . . My plaintive plea: Won't somebody card me, please . . . ."

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So then, five years ago. I ran smack into the big 8-0. I wrote a piece for the occasion titled *Turning 80*, and shortly thereafter articles for my 60<sup>th</sup> college reunion and my 65<sup>th</sup> high school (Horace Mann) reunion. These octogenarian musings weren't so much different from 75, with one major exception (as you'll see); and I find that what I said back then is still true at 85, only more so.



For me, the big difference between 80 and prior milestone birthdays was summed up in a quote I saw at the time 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’ve tried to disregard stuff like that, it’s become a reality that hovers out there, refusing to be ignored – even when I’m feeling full of beans.

Have you looked recently at what the Old Testament has to say on the subject? It starts out very matter-of-factly – “The days of our years are three-score years and ten.” That, for you non-math majors, comes to 70. Then the prophets appear to throw the elderly a bone: “or even by reason of strength four-score years” (that’s up to 80) – but then it’s quickly snatched away with this bleak caveat: “yet is their pride but travail and vanity; for it is speedily gone, and we fly away.”

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 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. For years, my late buddy Jack Doub and I attended reunions every single year. Not too many seasons ago, when we were on campus during an off-year, I asked Jack if a certain mutual acquaintance of ours was coming down for the festivities. Jack frowned as he replied: “No, he’s not. I talked to him, and he said, ‘I only come down for the majors’ [occurring every five years]. And I said to him, ‘Hey, there ain’t that many majors left.’”

It isn't just the quantity of the losses, but the quality too. I've been delivering too many eulogies for dear friends who are irreplaceable. 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. I became most aware of this when my first wife, Barbro, passed away some 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. But now I have to revisit these past times on my own.

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 had a good friend (a contemporary) who was much more comfortable in these worlds as a believer in Karma and reincarnation. "When you realize," he said, "that the concept of 'spirit' is not just an abstraction, then all fear of death dissolves." And here's how he put his then 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." (And, sadly for us – but perhaps not for him – he passed away within a short time.)

That seemed 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.

By the way, here's a supportive view from a 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. . . .

Meanwhile, buoyed by the fact that my mother, Marcy Freund, lived to a ripe 105, I like to assert, "Hey, I've got 20 good ones left in the genes" – ignoring my father's untimely passing at 67, and with me poised to arrive at the 86 average of their two lifetimes next year – thus putting off having to deal with this morbid stuff for the time being.

When mortality is on your mind, one thing you do is treat 80-plus as a sufficient milestone to pull together some of the stuff you've been doing over decades past. I made a five-disc CD of the best recordings I'd done in prior years. I made a DVD of 850 of my black & white photos. I collected all my articles and stories for publication in the near future. And not really knowing what lies ahead, and wanting to get this done while I still have all my marbles, I decided to write a memoir tentatively titled *The First 85 . . .* due to be published in the spring of 2020 (more on this later).

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Much of how we deal with life after 80 (and in spades at 85) has to do with the issue of health. It's dangerous to start a conversation with a contemporary by using the standard greeting of, "How ya doin'?" That used to evoke a "Fine – how're you?" response, at which point the two of you could get down to business.

Nowadays however, it can lead to an interminable medical/therapy interlude. As for the initial 15 minutes of a dinner out with senior friends, one wag has dubbed the invariable exchange of bodily info, “the organ recital.”

I’ve had my health problems over those years – dealing mainly with my aching back – and these have hampered me some, slowed me down physically; but this doesn’t compare in seriousness to the ailments that so many of my contemporaries have suffered from. Still it has produced an increased self-awareness of the fragility of my ongoing physical well-being. The prideful hubris I used to feel on the subject of health is gone.

(I must pause here to voice a complaint against the terminology used by doctors. If there’s one phrase I hate (used, e.g., about a bad back), 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. . . .)

Here’s what gets me about adjusting to the role of a partial invalid (which occasionally happens to me, as was the case with a knee I twisted playing tennis which required use of a cane). Everything appears more complicated and time-consuming than usual – I seem to be operating in slow motion. Staircases become a problem, and uphill climbs a real chore.

But what most fascinated me was how much I came to resemble an old-fashioned octogenarian (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 to pick it up.

I didn’t recall having experienced this previously and found it somewhat off-putting. Don’t they know that 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.

On my most recent solo airline foray, I wasn't tapping a cane, but people just seemed to know when I needed help. The escalator wasn't working; I would have to lug a heavy carry-on bag down a long flight of stairs; presto! my savior materialized, hoisted the bag and deposited it at the foot of the stairs. I must look old and helpless for that to happen. I'm glad people are helping, but it's a bit of a shock to the system that I appear so vulnerable.

Here's what I can't help noticing at 85. It's tougher walking any extended distance, or at any speed faster than sluggish. It's even tough standing around for a long time, as at a cocktail party. Your body wants to slope forward – it's work to keep it upright. And getting out of the back seat of a NYC taxi is pure torture.

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How about memory? Well, my sense is we overdo the significance of those memory lapses that are such a common source of complaints in our senior years. Most of us can remember what's really significant (like the name of our spouse), even if our minds take a hike on other names, phone numbers, and the location of car keys.

But one aspect of this keeps getting worse, and I addressed it two years ago in a poem titled "The Noun Nemesis". I started off by complaining about "The way you feel so damn absurd / when you forget a chosen word" . . . "You're vexed at the lack of text / irate at your empty plate / dismayed by the dumb blockade."

Then I analyzed the problem and arrived at this conclusion: “When a verbal abyss casts you amiss / (so you feel like a clown, face wreathed in a frown) / the word that’s escaped you is usually a noun.”

After illustrating why this was so, I contrasted it with other stuff. “Each other form of speech conceivable / is much more readily retrievable.” I went through each of them, e.g.: “With an adverb I’m superb”; “with a participle I’m no cripple”; and “I can run errands with gerunds.” But sadly, I concluded, “I’m not aces / with nouns, names and places.”

I wrote a long article on this subject a few years ago called *Senior Moments* – all about those pesky brain freezes that many of us experience with age. The good news is that we’re not alone – and the article contains many humorous examples of others who have failed to cope – but I also tried to distill some of the sobering (albeit conflicting) views on whether we should be worrying about any of this stuff. Let me know if you’d like a copy.

On a lighter note, my favorite joke in this area is one that I used to tell to break the ice when stepping up to the lectern – to plead my imperfect memory and justify why I was using notes for my speech.

My wife and I are dining at another couple’s house. After dinner, the wives repair to the kitchen, with the guys still at the table – and I’m complaining to my buddy about my failing memory.

“Oh,” says he, “I had the same problem, but my wife got me a great book that explains how to deal with it – by making image associations and such.”

“Great,” I say, “I’d like to read the book – what’s the title?”

My friend's brow furrows, he thinks for a moment and then says, "What's the name of the flower you give to someone for a special occasion?" I don't answer right away, so he continues, "You know, the one that's red and has thorns on the stem."

"Do you mean a rose?" I offer.

"That's it!" he says. Then, turning toward the kitchen, he yells, "Hey, Rose, what's the name of that memory book you gave me?"

An especially troublesome and sad condition here is coping with Alzheimer's or some other form of dementia. At my age, it's impossible to deny having wondered whether this might be in store – especially right after you've forgotten something you should have remembered, or repeated yourself, or lost your 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 out 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.

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.

This was brought home to me recently when a good friend, who had been experiencing a protracted run of serious health issues, said to me, "I'm now in an assisted living facility. I'd rather be in an assisted dying facility."

So I've devised my own test, which I have 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.)

\* \* \*

A recurring issue as the years pass – but with extra resonance at 85 – 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 that 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, 85? No way!" After I verify the number, they say something like, "Well, haven't you heard? – 85 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 the phone rang recently 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 sometimes 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.

\* \* \*

One thing I've become acutely aware of in later life (and have written about) is what I call "sheer happenstance." I find it amazing how many coincidences and other events outside of my control have had to happen in order for fateful encounters to occur (like meeting each of my wives) or new beginnings to happen (like attending Princeton or signing up early with the about-to-boom Skadden, Arps law firm). So much of my life (and I bet this is probably true with many of you) partakes of this chance character.

I don't mean to wax philosophical or religious, but let me just put it this way – if a superior being is pulling the strings, he or she works in some mighty mysterious and complex ways.

It's not only the good (or bad) things that do happen to you; it's also what you manage to avoid. In my search for a change of jobs before ending up at Skadden, I interviewed at various places. One wanted me very much, but for reasons that I'm not particularly proud of today, I turned them down. Another I liked a lot and would have accepted if they'd offered me a job, but they didn't. In either case, I would have wound up in a much less gratifying environment than the tree of life I encountered at Skadden.

The devilish twist of sheer happenstance is that while you're in the midst of one of these chain-of-events or decisional cycles, you don't even know it's happening. It's only when you get to a distant vantage point and can look back with some perspective that you can see what has occurred.

In more general terms, in that piece for our 25th college reunion yearbook on what I'd learned since graduation, the first of my ten commandments was, "Don't assume the accuracy of your current perspective. . . . Let's face it, we're all like blind men fondling an elephant. It's not easy to stand back and assess where things

stand." The examples I chose from my own life were of experiences that, at the time they occurred, seemed negative (like those three frigid years on a Navy icebreaker), but that later evolved into something positive (my interest in becoming a lawyer having stemmed directly from the court martial work I did at sea).

Does the axiom still apply today at 85? And if it still holds, might the examples go the other way – blissful present experiences harboring glimmers of the pits?

While I'm sure many of us are still in denial about something or other, I think that most octogenarians are prepared for the twists and surprises of life – for boom and for adversity. In general, our eyes are open – we know ourselves pretty well and can competently assess where things stand. In other words, this rope-like object I'm hanging onto is simply the tail, and there's a truly mammoth beast standing just a few feet in front of it. . . .

\* \* \*

As for negatives, here's one that doesn't really depend on being 85, but still bothers me a lot. 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 that 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 85 – 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 85 seems a tough age to succeed in substituting deprivation for rewards.

Many of the negative items that bothered me in my 75 and 80 pieces 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. I won't burden you with fresh details on these.

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 85, 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. I’m too crotchety here, as Barbara often reminds me. I frankly don’t see this trait improving appreciably in the years ahead. (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 canine-rescuer wife.)

One thing about being 85 is the diminution of your visibility to those who used to seek and value your views, opinions and judgments. To the extent your contemporaries are still around, they’re no longer in positions of influence where such views might be valuable; and the people one and two generations removed who now occupy those positions have their own contemporaries from whom to seek guidance. It’s perfectly understandable, but notwithstanding, I miss the opportunity to do some serious thinking about issues and problems and to hold forth on what I’d recommend.

Here’s something I’ve noticed on the verge of 85 – 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 tennis court, I even take quiet pride in the realization – but I bet this is something my peers are encountering a lot of lately.

\* \* \*

So, at 85 how do I spend my time?

I've written a lot about the subject of retirement in past pieces, 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 for various classes (this year three of them) at Princeton Reunions; I take and edit photos; I'm trying to write readable prose, both fiction non-fiction; and I remain active in selecting candidates for public service fellowships through my Princeton class.

I may sound like a guy who's filling every waking hour with productive activity, but let me now confess to you how I spend five to ten percent of my waking hours – doing puzzles. I've always done crosswords and acrostics; lately I've become enamored with ken-ken, kakuro and sudoku. I'm not world-class at any of these – for instance, I steer well clear of The New York Times crosswords on Friday and Saturday. But I'm good enough to take on some difficult stuff and sometimes succeed – as with the Spelling Bee puzzles on the New York Times app, where this year I achieved “amazing” or “genius” status on over 100 consecutive days. I often start off the day spending 20 minutes or so in mental warm-up exercise – ten with a logic puzzle to get the left side of my brain functioning, and ten with a word game to jostle my vocabulary. There's also an added element here. In a world of increasing complexity, where definitive results are hard to come by, it's reassuring to tackle something that has a single successful outcome – quite satisfying when achieved and not all that devastating when you come up short.

I have a personal and professional website to showcase my piano CD's, photos, essays and stories, articles, etc. (The web address is [jimfreund.com](http://jimfreund.com).) There's a lot of stuff in there, and it's a real source of pride for me. I'm sure some people viewing it will say (as others have over the years), "Jim, you're a real Renaissance man." And I will truthfully reply (as I have consistently) that the trouble with being

a Renaissance man is that you have to run like hell to keep one step ahead of being a dilettante.

I'm much less active now in the matters that relate back to my profession – representing clients, acting as a mediator of commercial disputes, serving as an expert witness, lecturing and giving seminars on subjects such as negotiating. (Not that I'm unavailable . . . .)

My major project last year and this has been writing a personal memoir. It hasn't been easy, but I'm pleased that as of my 85<sup>th</sup> birthday I've finished a good draft of almost the whole thing. I'm shooting to complete and self-publish it in the spring of 2020.

The memoir deals with my whole life, although containing relatively little material on the early years. The major portions cover my education – high school, college and law school; the Navy years; my law career; and how I've spent the several decades following retirement from my law firm. There are also chapters that focus on my mother and father, my wives, and my sons.

The reason for writing this is to get down on paper the several elements of my life, the stories that grew out of them, and my reflections on the people closest to me. Admittedly, my principal audience is myself; I'd also like to think that members of my immediate family (including children and future generations) will find it of interest; and I hope that at least some of my other relatives, friends, colleagues and acquaintances will be curious enough – perhaps only regarding certain portions – to peruse the book. It is not aimed at people who don't know me – I doubt they'd have much interest in what I've been up to all these years.

Trying to reconstruct the past isn't simple, but I consider it a worthwhile endeavor – and I recommend the task to others. It's not only a case of recalling the good times and memorable people (although this certainly heads the list); it's also

re-examining some periods that I didn't view positively at the time, to probe for worthwhile aspects that have been overlooked, and to use the perspective of time to make some fresh observations about the individuals in my life.

Bottom line, the principal focus of a memoir has to be the memoirist. I've tried to be as even-handed and candid about my self-appraisal as possible – approving certain things I did, disapproving others, wondering why I did what I did. And, of course, I examined anew all those items of “sheer happenstance” that had major effects on my life.

The title I've selected – *The First 85 . . . A Memoir* by Jim Freund – is a recognition that although more years may come my way down the road, this seemed like a good time to take stock. I hope those of you reading this essay will give my memoir a gander and let me know your reaction.

\* \* \*

(The following thoughts follow very closely the ones I expressed five years ago – some things in later life don't change very much.)

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 several 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, laugh a lot, 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 16 and 14) are bright, pretty, warm, and utterly delightful. My times with them are a real tonic, and I feel their affection 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 35th wedding anniversary this coming 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 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 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 part-time secretary Pauline, Barbara’s driver Gent, and a host of others.

\* \* \*

As for what lies ahead, I first took a look back at what I’d anticipated when turning 80. Here’s what I said about 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.”

And so it did – two years ago I published my first (and only) novel, *Three’s a Crowd*. It was difficult to write, but very satisfying when completed. I don’t foresee, however, trying to write another one in the years ahead. I think I’ll dabble in fiction, but it’s likely to be just short stories. I do intend, though, to collect all the short fiction I’ve written – 31 stories, plus a play – into one published volume. I’m sure I’ll continue to write essays on subjects that interest me (and also intend to collect the 40 or so I’ve written since retirement into one published volume).

When I turned 80, I said I wanted to write songs – both the words and the music – but I haven't done any of this in the past half-decade. So this goes on my list looking ahead. And I'll stick with playing music and taking photographs, each of which furnishes great satisfaction.

But once my memoirs are completed, I'm seriously considering cutting down on the number of projects I undertake going forward – carving out for myself more time to read, watch movies and videos, and perhaps just goof off more than I've been doing. This is something I hope I can achieve.

\* \* \*

So at 85, I'm maintaining a very positive outlook and well-satisfied with what I've accomplished up to this point. Other than completing the memoir, I don't have a bucket list to fulfill going forward. I feel comfortable about my health and state of mind, although recognizing there may be real challenges ahead.

I'll close with a negative and a positive. The negative involves that new phone app that shows you what you're going to look like some years in the future. I made the mistake of taking a peek. That's my face – I know it's me – but with such wrinkles that I expect to have a tough time facing a mirror.

The positive occurred in a restaurant just the other day, when I ordered a beer. The waiter (I swear to this!) asked for some proof of age. I couldn't believe it, stammered out something about being 85, pointed to my white hair – but he didn't back off, and I had to produce my license. Now, I know that he must have been told by management to card everybody that walks in the door, but still I'll take it as a positive sign for the decade to come . . . .

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Jim Freund