

TURNING 75

by **Jim Freund**
(in) 2009

After months of personal indecision over whether to write this piece, here's the inside story on how I finally decided to go ahead with it.

Some weeks ago, I was at home finishing up my lunch when I got a call from my friend Ed. "I've been waiting at the restaurant for an hour," Ed said, more regretfully than in anger – "I guess you're not coming."

I slapped the heel of my hand against my forehead. *Oh, God, I'd completely forgotten about our lunch date.* I stammered out words of chagrin to Ed, who accepted my apology gracefully. We made a new date for the following week.

An hour later, I was talking on my cell when Ed rang back on the home phone. "Jim, I'm afraid I have to change that date we just made."

"No problem," I replied. "But Ed, I'm on the other phone right now. I'll call you back in five minutes when I get off."

At 7 a.m. the next morning, I awoke to the startled realization that I'd neglected to call Ed back after my other conversation ended. *Damn, I chastised myself, this is doubly terrible. I have to call Ed right away to apologize again and make the new date. Well, maybe I should wait until 9 a.m., so as not to wake him*

At noon that day, Ed called to say, "We never connected again yesterday" There it was – my third lapse in two days.

I begged his pardon once more. He reassured me, and we picked another date. As we talked, I wrote the new day on a yellow post-it note that I stuck on the tip of my nose – determined not to shower until after the lunch finally took place.

Then Ed said, "By the way, Jim, since we're both turning 75 this year, I have a question for you. I still remember the enjoyable article you wrote back then about turning 50. Are you going to do another one this time?"

As I mentioned, I'd been considering whether or not to pen such an essay, weighing arguments that cut both ways – but now, in an instant, my decision was made. "Yes—" I replied without hesitation, "—and I'm going to kick it off with the story of our lunch date fiasco."

So, now that I've identified (to no one's surprise, I'm sure) those pesky lapses of short-term memory as a particularly irritating facet of aging – and, perhaps even worse, my realization (from Ed's calm demeanor and reassuring words) that he might actually have expected this kind of behavior from me! – what else can be said about turning 75? What's the significance of the occasion? How's my mood and outlook? Are my reactions idiosyncratic or mainstream?

In contrast to other landmark birthdays that engender voting privileges and the right to buy a drink, inaugurate Medicare and social security payments, etc., nothing much happens the day you turn 75. I'm not aware of anything you become eligible for, nor can I think of any activities from which you're precluded. And I'm assuming the people I chance to encounter in the months ahead – even those who may be aware of the event – won't treat me any differently.

A Little Perspective

But let's face it – 75 is a hell of a lot of years. Try this on for historical perspective. 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. . . .

Forget history – let me put this in personal perspective. That piece I wrote upon turning 50 was very upbeat. I was feeling young and doing youthful things. No wonder – I had recently met my exuberant baby boomer wife-to-be, Barbara Fox, and was (in my words at the time) "dancing to her beat." In the lyrics of a song I wrote that year (entitled "49.9"), I predicted that "this next decade ahead should be the best I've ever had." And so it turned out to be – at least the period between 50 and 55, which was a terrific run in both personal and professional terms.

The year we all turned 60, my Princeton class asked me to address the topic at our annual dinner. But 60 didn't come as easily 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!"

The years of turning 65 and then 70 passed without my feeling the need to publicly note the events, although I did write several general pieces on the subject of retirement and to mark the occasion of our 50th college reunion – pieces from which some of the observations in here have been lifted. But for me, 75 is a special kind of milestone, and I do believe it's an appropriate time to take stock. (I must say, though, that virtually all my friends who have turned 75 recently have done so in much more stealthful fashion – I haven't been invited to any splashy parties nor received a single essay.)

The Big Plus/Big Minus

There's one indisputable plus to turning 75 for me and my chronological compatriots: WE MADE IT! Seventy-five exceeds the biblical three score and ten by half a decade. So, the satisfaction over simply having survived has to be my first significant reaction.

This achievement is underscored by the disturbing reality that a growing number of our brethren haven't made the cut. Each February, I'm painfully reminded of this at a Princeton memorial service honoring alumni who have departed during the prior year. I've been told that the aggregate number of classmates succumbing doubles between the 40th and 50th college reunion. I don't even want to know what the mortality percentage is from the 50th to the 60th.

So survival is the big plus. There's 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 is awesome, creating a problem in our heads and making us conscious of our mortality. That's why some people who are along in years, when

asked how old they are, reply that "Age is a number and mine is unlisted."

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 today, I find myself perched on the brink of an unwelcome reversal of the digits.

My contemporaries will recall how old General Eisenhower seemed when we were kids. Well, a month ago, I saw an article about the replacement of the top U.S. Army general in Afghanistan. There he was – the new commanding officer in this major war zone – and he's 20 years my junior! Oh, and another piece ran recently, profiling the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court – I've got about 20 years on him also. And that's not even deigning to mention my disparity in age with the kid who currently occupies the White House

Shakespeare was no help, with 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 75 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 "shrunke shank" – to say nothing of the seventh age ("second childishness . . . sans everything").

Incidentally, the one segment I'd like to retract from that "turning 50" piece was my comparison of 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'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." 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.

Once you get beyond the indisputable concepts of mere survival and psychologically-it-sucks, the 75 state of play becomes complex, making it difficult to generalize. Even for a single individual, there's a host of competing factors. What makes it tougher still is that each of us arriving at this juncture has a quite personal response to the event. I'll offer you my own take on things; but while some may share these views, others are undoubtedly sprinkled all along the reaction spectrum.

Four Key Considerations

In reflecting on this disparity of viewpoint, I've come to conclude that much depends on how an individual stands in four key areas – health, family and friends, finances, and work/retirement/interests.

Health-wise, I'm pleased to be able to say (knock wood) that I've made it here in pretty good shape. I still play tennis – singles more than doubles – although on hot days we take some extra time at the water cooler when changing sides. My wife and I ski down steep (albeit well-groomed!) trails each year. I exercise regularly, although (according to Barbara) consistently failing to work up enough of a

sweat. There are minor aches and pains, but nothing hurts too much or is disabling or particularly worrisome.

Obviously, this isn't the case with everyone, and I'm well aware that your viewpoint on turning 75 has to be colored in substantial part by what kind of physical shape you're in. Still, even for those with a myriad of health issues, it beats the alternative. As someone said to me recently when I voiced that thought, "Yeah, you're mowing the lawn instead of looking at the root system."

The second element is family and friends. I feel really blessed in this regard – a wife for all seasons (more on her later), terrific sons, adorable granddaughters, and a mother who remains alert and insightful at 101. There's a lot of additional good family on both my side and Barbara's. I have a legion of friends who help make life special. Many people – most notably Raymond, Ann, and Gloria – provide me with splendid support. I recognize that others not so fortunate in these regards might well have a different take on three-quarters-of-a-century.

I've always been close to my sons – an outcome that's not always assured when divorce severs family unity during adolescence. They've grown up into admirable young men – different in many ways, but remaining close although a continent apart. Erik (east coast) has pursued a business career and shown a real knack for organization and getting things done. Tom (west coast) is a professional musician – a singer-songwriter of talent and accomplishment. Erik and Tom married estimable women (Wendy and Francie), and each plays a significant and loving fatherly role to a captivating young daughter (Paige and Delilah). As I'm writing these words, Erik, Tom and I have embarked on a boys-only junket into the California wine country – a trip that is definitely the highlight of my pre-birthday celebrations.

Just a few words here on my mother, who is still going strong. I see her several times a week and call her daily at midnight –

when her evening is just getting started. She's full of matriarchal advice ("*Here's* what you should be writing about"), critical of my appearance ("Pull that sweater down over your belly"), and alert to meteorological conditions anywhere in the vicinity of her grandchildren ("What about those high winds on the west coast?"). I marvel at her consistency. Recently, I brought a peppy nonagenarian woman up to her home for a visit – a woman who is used to being the oldest person in the room. They got along well, and then my mother asked her how old she was. "I'm 91," the woman replied proudly. "Oh," said mom – shades of the Princeton group! – "You're a child."

The third factor is financial. I can well understand how it would be hard to feel positive about "the golden years" when you're under a lot of financial pressure. This past year, of course, has been especially trying to many people in that respect. Barbara and I have endured those recent financial shocks to the system like everyone else, but as my good friend Fred likes to say, "It's not how much you've lost – it's how much you have left." So, my paeon to 75 springs from a satisfactory (albeit reduced) level of financial comfort – but I do realize how much this factor can affect one's views.

The fourth element has to do with work, retirement, interests, and such. My hat's off to those of you my age – and I can think of many examples – who are still working and love what they do. Conversely, I feel for those still working who aren't loving it, but who either need to keep going for financial reasons or are fearful of retiring and finding out they have nothing to do.

Pro's and Con's of Retirement

I want to spend a few minutes on the subject of retirement because, at 75, most of us are either retired or facing up to whether and when to retire. Here's how I summed up my views in an article I wrote upon retiring. When you get right down to it, there are

only two good reasons to retire voluntarily (other than for matters of health or to move onto another career) – either you no longer get a kick out of what you've been doing, or there are other things you'd much prefer to take on. The best case for retirement is when both these reasons are applicable. If neither apply, you won't (and shouldn't) retire. If you're no longer professionally motivated but have no other interests, retiring is dangerous; I'd think that just being bored is insufficient to take this step – you have to be thoroughly unhappy. The toughest call is when you're happy in your work but have strong pulls elsewhere. My personal advice would usually be to keep working, provided you can manage to squeeze in a little of those other interests along the way (as I did for many years).

I left the practice of law relatively early and have now been retired for over a dozen years. I've managed to fill my time with a number of mostly pleasurable and gratifying activities. Other retirees I've encountered run the gamut from enjoyment to satisfaction to boredom to unhappiness.

As I've said elsewhere, I consider retirement a "package deal," a balancing of positive and negative factors. For most of the positives, there's a correlative potential negative lurking around the corner. For instance:

- You're not beholden to or pressured by clients, patients, customers, bosses, etc. (hurrah!). The counterbalance is the realization that you weren't indispensable – that even if you're missed, you can be replaced. No one depends on you now professionally or seeks your advice – you're out of sight, out of mind – and that can be a real downer.
- Your time is your own, with the freedom to do whatever you want (a real plus); but there's no structure or schedule to your day, which can be a little daunting, at least at first.

- There are no more tough negotiations or bruising professional confrontations (that's a relief); but you spend a lot of time alone, so you have to learn how to be good company for yourself.
- You can fly off to Bali or tool around in your new Mini Cooper (how nice); but even if you're flush, it's still a shock to watch the dollars flowing out when none are flowing in. And while frugality may be an admirable goal, it's damn tough to relinquish creature comforts you enjoyed in the good old income-producing days.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of retirement is giving up voluntarily the one thing you're best at and most known for. Let's face it – very little adulation, even for past glories, comes your way in retirement. This can be a major jolt that definitely tests your self-esteem. I'm as receptive to acclaim and sensitive to criticism as the next guy, but I've tried hard not to fall into the trap of letting my self-esteem be dependent on the praise or positive reaction of others. At 75, 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."

Retirement Activities

The way I've coped with these negatives – and heartily recommend a similar approach to others – has been by engaging in activities that fall into four major categories:

- Having fun. Hey, retirement is supposed to be enjoyable – some travel, sports, reading, entertainment, grandkids – so don't pack your days too heavily with demanding activities that leave no time for the sweet stuff.

- Doing something that calls into play the skills developed during your working years. It's wasteful to let your expertise just atrophy and gratifying to discover that you've still "got it." I taught at law school for a while, enjoying the act of passing knowledge on to a new generation. I still conduct interactive negotiating seminars. And I mediate business disputes (and write articles on the subject), which is demanding work that engenders a real sense of satisfaction when I'm able to help the disputants reach a reasonable compromise resolution.
- Spending time in the public interest area – giving something back after so many years of receiving. For me, playing the piano for weekly senior citizen singalongs and selecting candidates for public service fellowships fill the bill. (I'll have more to say on these activities later on.)
- Taking on one or more challenging activities – something that can be done on your own, involves a degree of skill, requires effort, rewards improvement, and hopefully produces something to be viewed with pride and perhaps shared with others. I've gone a little overboard here with three such activities: playing the piano, taking photos, and writing (especially fiction).

Many of the retirees I know who appear the most satisfied with their lot manage to do something in each of these four areas – as well as having the good fortune to be reasonably affluent, in good health, and part of a supportive family. If you're at or approaching 75, you might want to assess how you measure on this scale.

Some Thoughts on The Challenge

Let me say a few more words about what I call the "challenge". I don't know about you, but when I've been working on something for a good while, I like to see evidence of the task's completion. Sure, the process may be enjoyable, but I feel more fulfilled if it ends up as a product. My hunch is that some people who spend lots of time on an otherwise admirable activity – one that keeps on going, but doesn't produce anything that participants can stand back and admire (or point out to friends as an achievement) – may be experiencing some dissatisfaction. So, where you have the choice, I recommend signing onto something that comes to fruition or generates one or more products.

In this respect, by the way, I think photography takes the blue ribbon as a retirement activity. It's available to everyone and doesn't require a lot of schooling, research or experience. The financial outlay isn't that hefty. It requires some skill, but the technology does a lot of the work for you. There's always room for creativity and improvement – that's the challenge. You produce a product every time you take a good picture. And it doesn't have to be artistic – I get a kick out of taking photos of relatives and friends, cropping and editing the best ones, and providing them with prints suitable for framing.

For a while after retirement, I sang and played with my trio (piano, bass and guitar) in some decent Manhattan clubs and lounges – especially one at the Lombardy Hotel. Ultimately, however, I didn't find this satisfying. The gigs were fine for professional musicians who needed to put bread on the table; but for me, with other sources of bread, it was disconcerting to be giving my all while the clientele (including many acquaintances) ate, drank and conversed.

Still, I felt the need for a musical outlet – but one featuring more interaction with the audience. I soon found it –

playing for singalongs at senior citizen centers. I've been doing this now for over a decade – at least once and often twice a week, primarily at two Manhattan centers. At my weekly gig, there's a steady crowd of about 30 singers who come in from all around the city (and one fellow travels from Philadelphia). Some have fine voices and offer solos, a couple of them dance, and everyone sings with enthusiasm. We've even made two compact disc recordings. The seniors give me timely feedback, convey affection, and let me know how important this outlet is in their weekly lives. But it's not only working for them – it also provides me with a real sense of fulfillment.

Starting out on this singalong gig, I was the youngster in the room; now, I'm definitely one of the seniors myself. I've developed a healthy respect for people who are coping with advancing age, as they try to inject some joy into their everyday existence. Unfortunately, the singalongs serve also as a reminder of our mortality. Every so often, one of the regulars doesn't show up for a while, and then we get the bad news of his or her demise. But so far there's been a continual flow of new voices to take the places of those missing in action.

As you can tell, I like being among people of my age group and older. But it's also important in retirement to have some meaningful contact with young people. You can feed off their energy and enthusiasm, while being in a position to offer words of wisdom from time to time. One of the things I missed most when I retired from my law firm was mentoring younger lawyers. Nowadays, I've replaced some of that through interacting with the youngsters involved in the fellowships we sponsor (more on that below). For those of us who are halfway up the septuagenarian ladder, it makes good sense to seek out situations and activities involving young people.

Even if you've found the pursuit you want to follow, I think it's wise not to settle into a comfort zone where you're simply repeating yourself. When possible, seek out something new within the format that offers a further challenge. If it doesn't work out, or you don't particularly like it – or if it works out, but you're satisfied that you've proven your point – then you can always go back to what you were doing in the first place.

For example, I had always written, but never tried fiction, so that was a particular challenge for me. As you might expect, it's not that easy a transition. Instead of beating readers over the head with unambiguous advice on, say, how to negotiate, I had to learn to hold back – be more oblique, let readers reach their own conclusions. I haven't been altogether successful in this regard, and I'm not sure fiction is my ultimate metier, but I'm glad I did it; and my book of short stories about lawyers, *Smell Test*, was published by the American Bar Association last year.

With respect to photography, I've now had a number of exhibits of my work and two books published by Fordham University Press. Photographs are wonderful for capturing the look of a place, or a moment in time, but it's not always easy to tell a coherent story through them – and I wanted to tell some stories through visual images. So I turned to shooting video, which also allowed me to include a narration for added depth, plus a musical soundtrack from my own recordings.

On the other hand, shifting gears doesn't always work out. Upon retiring, I decided to become a real jazz pianist – a calling dependent upon improvisation. I asked a professional jazz pianist friend to give me lessons. He came over to the house and asked me to play something. After I finished, he said, "Well, that's okay, Jim, but you need to limber up those fingers in order to make the runs that are at the heart of improvisation. So here's what you have to do." And he sat down and proceeded to play a variety of scales with both hands, in

various keys and modes, starting slowly and simply but getting increasingly swift and complex. "I can't do that," I protested – realizing that not only was I incapable of it technically, but that the task would likely bore me to tears. "Well, then," he said, "you'll never become a successful jazz pianist."

A little epilogue here. Shortly thereafter, a New Yorker profile on Hank Jones, a leading jazz pianist, revealed that Jones – then well into his 80's – still practiced scales for two hours every day!

Well, I didn't do it, and as a result, I'm not a real jazz pianist. I try to inject a jazz feel into my playing – I guess you could call my playing "jazzy". And, using a fake book, I do take some liberties and never play a song the same way twice. But knowing my limitations, I seldom impose my less-than-stellar improvisations on listeners, concentrating instead on how best to present the tune the composer actually wrote. I'd still relish being able to improvise capably; but I realize that unless and until I'm willing to devote more time and attention to it than I'm presently prepared to offer, this isn't going to happen.

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 sudoku, kakuro and ken-ken. 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. 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 crossword 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.

As I write this piece, I'm involved in creating a personal and professional website, to showcase my piano CD's, photos, essays and stories, mediation articles, etc. There's a lot of stuff in there, and it will be 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 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.

Some 75-Year-Old Negatives

Well, at this point you may be thinking that, after my initial lapse of short-term memory, I've been pretty positive about turning 75. It's time now for some of the negatives.

I'll tell you one of my biggest bugaboos – a seeming inability to locate specific possessions of mine at the time I want them to appear. Nothing – I repeat, *nothing* – has been the object of more self-flagellation in recent years. The objects in question are rarely lost, usually turning up hours or days later, when they're no longer in such immediate demand. But if someone out there has a surefire panacea for this, please let me in on it before I go over the edge.

Have you noticed – or is it just my problem – how everything seems to take a lot longer to do nowadays? I'm not talking about major projects – just mundane stuff, like getting ready to go play tennis in the country on Saturday morning. I wake up early enough, but then fritter away time reading newspapers and such; and before I know it, I'm supposed to arrive at the court (which is ten minutes away) in a half hour. Well, I think, that should be eminently doable. Oh, yeah? Just watch

I haven't stretched yet – even my abbreviated routine takes a few minutes. I need to switch the orthotics from my street shoes to the sneakers. Don't forget to apply the suntan lotion. I have to locate a towel, a fresh shirt to put on after playing, and my tennis sunglasses (which are different from my driving sunglasses, which I also need). Remember to tape the French Open match that will otherwise be missed. Should I take the Advil before or after playing? Fill the thermos with cold water. One baseball cap for the match, one for riding home (because the other will be sweaty). Adjust the hot tub temperature to be ready when I return. Make sure all the dogs are in the house, so I don't run one over when exiting the premises. And so on. Each minor task takes time, with the result that I'm 20 minutes late arriving. The three other guys in the game are all warmed up and consulting their watches as I pull in, blaming the terrible traffic. . . .

I'll tell you one thing that really bothers me. For years now, I've wanted to shed about 15 pounds, but can't seem to do it. I start on a diet, succeed briefly, and then fall off the wagon. I go on exercise machines, but don't really push myself to weight-reduction speeds for lengthy durations. My wife and even my mother chide me about the poundage, but I can't seem to muster the self-discipline to get it done. As I write this, I'm on another such kick now – bye, bye bagels, so long pizza – with the goal of being trim for my birthday. So far it's been going well, but if truth be known – based on past precedents – my confidence level is only so-so.

How about memory? Well, notwithstanding the dramatic events that kicked off this essay, 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 phone numbers and whether or not certain small bills have been paid. Now, to be sure, if you find yourself coming into work without trousers, or mistake the conference room for the men's room, it might be worthwhile to have your situation diagnosed....

My 101-year old mother, who is sometimes a little shaky on current details (but not alarmingly so), has the most phenomenal recall of past events that I've ever encountered. For example, a few weeks ago, I took her for a drive down memory lane. We searched for and ultimately found the small apartment house just north of Central Park where she had lived as a schoolgirl and teenager. I parked the car in front of the door and then sat there in awe as multiple memories from over 80 years ago flashed across her mind. Her school was down the block, there was a little bakery across the street (now a clothing outlet) where she'd be sent to buy bread, the building's super occupied the basement apartment, Aunt so-and-so lived around the corner, her mother used to lean out of a certain window (pointing to it) to call down to the street, her older brothers would take her ice skating in the Park, a wealthy boyfriend once picked her up right here in a limousine, and so on. It was a grand tour de force.

So, I don't want to hear any more crap – including from myself! – about those pesky little lapses in memory. The big stuff is still plenty secure.

I'm tempted to say something in this section about the proliferation of dogs and cats in my life, especially since my wife – who never mentioned a word about either species prior to signing our pre-nup – started a praiseworthy organization to rescue stray animals (for whom, in more than a few instances, we've become the ultimate recipient). There are some complaints I could register – for instance, about the tiny sliver of our king-size bed to which I'm nightly relegated by the menagerie in the middle. . . . But the practicalities are that I've got to live with this woman (who's otherwise flawless), so I'm just going to pass.

Coping Mechanisms

Let's talk a bit about coping mechanisms. For instance, there's a little mental trick I've been playing on myself in recent years – a device to keep me from being too disappointed when things over which I have no control don't work out the way I'd like them to. Here's my operating premise. Most good things that are due to happen (but might not) have some negative aspect or cost attached to them; conversely, many bad things contain some element of benefit (or, at least, absence of detriment). While I'm waiting to find out which way the cookie will crumble, I focus on the positive portions of each alternative – so that whichever way things go, I'll be gaining some benefit out of the result.

For example, if I'm waiting to learn whether someone will cancel so I can get tickets to that sold-out Broadway show, I know how much I'd like to wind up in the theatre – but if not, look at all the money I'm saving. Or let's say I'm being considered as a mediator to handle an interesting dispute in Nome, Alaska. I hope I'll be picked – but if not, there's something to be said for avoiding a week in the tundra.

When there's no negative aspect of the good thing to weigh in the balance, I focus on a separate alternative benefit that would not otherwise be available if the good thing came to pass. Take, for instance, a recent Saturday morning when I was scheduled to play tennis. As dawn broke, rain clouds were hovering perilously close to the court. I wanted to play but recognized that this wasn't within my control. So I focused on how I'd spend my morning if rained out. It just so happened that I was in the midst of writing this interminable "Turning 75" essay. A rain day meant that I'd be able to spend a few uninterrupted hours on the piece (which, God knows, could have used the additional polish). It wasn't as desirable to me as the tennis, but that's what I thought about; and if it had rained, I would have been

okay with that alternative. As it turned out, it didn't rain; and (aside from being 20 minutes late for the match) I was even happier with that outcome. (I realize that *you* might have been happier, as you read this, if it had rained a little more often.)

On the other hand, I've got a feeling that the glass-half-empty crowd probably takes the opposite tack – you know, the food's lousy, and such small portions, too.

A few years ago, my friend Sherwin advanced the concept that when you reach a certain point in life – 75 is ideal for the purpose – 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. The phrase he coined for this was "The Refuge of Age." Sherwin claimed that at this point in your life everyone is more understanding of your foibles – lack of energy, lapses of memory, and the like – and is willing to relieve you of such onerous burdens as carrying heavy baggage.

Although some younger friends of mine scorned the concept – an "obsolete attitude about aging," one termed it, insisting that science is daily disproving such stereotypical ideas – I'll admit it held a certain appeal for me. For example, even as a young man, I was never any good at skiing the bumps. But now I can avoid any mogul field by simply implying that the old knees (which are just fine) can't take the pounding.

Then again, its usefulness isn't a slam dunk. For instance, one place that the Refuge of Age hasn't a prayer of working is in connection with a sin of omission – which, as defined by Ogden Nash (who needed a rhyme for Buddha), "consists of not having done something you shudda." Just try invoking your old codger status to excuse a lack of sensitivity to one of those oblique spousally-transmitted signals (like failing to recognize and comment on the new

hairdo she's flaunting in front of your eyes) – I guarantee it won't get you anywhere.

When you're 75, you ought to be realistic about what lies ahead. Here's a good example. I help run a public service foundation sponsored by my Princeton class of 1956. The foundation awards one-year fellowships, funded by class members, to graduating Princeton seniors who devise a public service project they'll undertake for a deserving but needy organization that wouldn't otherwise be able to afford them. We also do some significant work in inner city high schools, priming kids on the value of a college education and helping them to apply. We're quite proud of what we've been able to accomplish in these areas over the last decade. But we also realized that if we wanted our achievements to survive into the future, we needed some help from younger hands – a partial passing of the torch, so to speak.

So last year we linked up with members of the Princeton class of 1981 (the graduating class the year we had our 25th reunion, whose own 25th coincided with our 50th). We renamed our organization Princeton ReachOut 56-81, brought the '81 people into key positions in the organization, and have been functioning together ever since. We're also hopeful of including the class of 2006 in this partnership, for a full 50-year span that will guarantee our longevity and insure that these good works won't cease with our demise.

Final Reflections

One thing I've become acutely aware of in later life is what I call "sheer happenstance." It's amazing to me how many coincidences and other events outside of my control have had to occur in order for fateful encounters (like meeting each of my wives) or new beginnings (like attending Princeton or signing up with Skadden, Arps) to occur. 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. At any rate, I've been working on a separate piece about this subject that I hope to send out at year-end.

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 a 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," I said, "we're all like blind men fondling an elephant. It's not easy to stand back and assess where things stand." And 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 75? 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 75-ers 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. . . .

I'm convinced that a prime reason I have a positive youthful outlook on 75 is that I'm poised in space and time between

two strong women, both of whom I love dearly. At one extreme, there's my remarkable mother. Let me tell you, when you hit 75, you can really appreciate 101.... I mean, how can I feel old when this woman (who banged pots and pans together on the fire escape to celebrate Armistice Day of World War I) recounts scenes where I'm the only male infant ("... and with two different color eyes...") in the 1934 hospital nursery? Then there's my wife, many years my junior, whose multiple activities and energy make me constantly strive to keep up. Neither of these tenacious ladies allow me to feel elderly for a minute.

Let me say a few more words about Barbara, my wife of the past 24 years. She's a real dynamo – constantly in motion, tackling all kinds of challenges. The residential real estate brokerage firm she founded 20 years ago – Fox Residential Group – has grown to 40 brokers and was recently named in the press as one of the three finest boutique firms in Manhattan, while Barbara individually was cited as the top boutique broker. She also rescues abandoned dogs and cats while tending her own menagerie, plants vegetable and flower gardens, cooks with panache every Saturday night, keeps in great shape by working out often, skis and plays tennis, nourishes her nieces and nephews, yaps with her sister ten times a day, and so on. Oh yes, and takes very loving and supportive care of yours truly. Just being around all that energy, accomplishment and support has had a very positive influence on me.

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 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."

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:
“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.”

Until recently, my mother never wanted her acquaintances to know what her age was – fearing that their presuppositions and stereotypes regarding persons of advanced years would cause them to place limits on her to which she didn't subscribe. With all due respect to mom, I come out the other way. I'm proud of the fact that at 75 I'm still running on all cylinders – an appraisal that might be less valued in someone of 65 – and I don't mind a bit who knows it. And if that comes off as too self-congratulatory, I take comfort in the sentiment I heard voiced recently by the veteran cabaret singer, Marilyn Maye: "At this age, I'm too old to be humble."

So what's my final word? 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'm 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 Won't somebody card me, please