

Husbanding our mental resources

You know you're getting old when either one or both of the following occur.

1) You run into a group of people who seem to recognize you and identify themselves as old high school chums. At this point you put yourself into search mode but can only come up with the name of the person who called out your name and who you suddenly remember as the "hottie" you dated twice in grade 12 (because she self-identified). The names of the other five who all seem to know you are unretrievable and doing the "Hi, how are you and you and you," social dance is quickly becoming really uncomfortable. The only lifesaver in this scenario is if you had the prescience to marry someone from your high school who immediately recognizes everyone

and starts quickly giving their names (because she knows full well that you have no idea). Having navigated your way through this social minefield with a combination of good luck and good life-partner choices you still find yourself wondering why you feel so weird in what should be a bit of warm social nostalgia.

The cause of discomfiture becomes obvious when, during the obligatory handshaking, you are struck with the clear realization that all of them look, dress, and act so much older than you (this most depressingly includes the hottie). When you finally part company with the usual entreaties of some future social something or other you turn to your high school sweetheart and mutter, "I can't believe how old they are." Then the cold realization of

terminal telomeres comes home to roost when she tilts her head in your general direction and off-handedly says, "Have you looked in the mirror lately?"

2) You get an invitation to attend a "recognition event" where for some unfathomable reason a group of otherwise intelligent people have decided to present you with some kind of memento commemorating your supposed contributions. I can't figure out what those contributions might be other than I've managed to live a few more years than some of my contemporaries. However, my ego balloon usually needs some inflating these days as I work more with pixels than with sentient biological units, so I suppose I will go and feed the narcissistic demon

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that lives in all of us. Who knows, this may be my only chance to have someone say something nice about me in public—the next time someone feels the need to make a public proclamation about me it may be a judge, or worse yet, someone giving my eulogy.

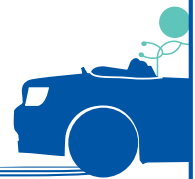
Most of us, as we age, tend to husband our mental resources and become pretty efficient at retrieving information that is at least subjectively important in our professional and personal domains. However, a lot of the other stuff is shuffled off to memory bins that can only be accessed by people with names like Raveen. After writing an editorial arguing against mandatory retirement a short time ago, I started to recall with some clarity the whole intellectual package of a number of my clinical teachers and mentors who were all well beyond the age of 65. They were an impressive lot and I remember them fondly as a group of excellent teachers who managed to thrill us eager students with the depth and breadth of their knowledge, the wisdom they incorporated into their diagnostic/treatment equations, and the warmth of their interactions with patients. In fact, these clinical mentors would all have been forced into mandatory retirement if they were still around today and a whole generation of today's teacher/mentors would have been denied exposure to their excellence. I don't want to continue that thought because it is really quite scary.

So, if you have an "I must be getting older" experience in the near future, take heart. Mandatory retirement is likely going to disappear relatively quickly and although your partner might think so, your brain really isn't undergoing atrophy, you're just getting better at retrieving the important stuff. Now where did I leave my glasses?

— JAW



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