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My Many Selves

Wayne C. Booth

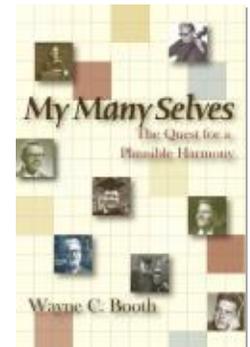
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Chapter Sixteen

The Old Fart Debates with a Bunch of Young Booths, While Posing as Younger Than 84

*Crabbèd age and youth cannot live together:
Youth is full of pleasance, age is full of care.*

—Shakespeare, “The Passionate Pilgrim”

*How blessed is he, who leads a country life,
Unvex'd with anxious cares, and void of strife!
Who studying peace, and shunning civil rage,
Enjoy'd his youth, and now enjoys his age.*

—John Dryden, “To John Driden of Chesterton”

*In my fortieth year, I was as clear and decided on some subjects as at present.
And, in many respects, superior to my present self; yet, now, in my eightieth,
I possess advantages which I would not exchange for these.*

—Goethe

*We are happier in many ways when we are old than when we were young. The
young sow wild oats. The old grow sage.*

—Winston Churchill

*Age is the bilge
we cannot shake from the mop.*

—Robert Lowell

*The better you express the losses, the less you've lost. To hold back the losses,
to capture the beauty that was, is to turn the loss into something else: a triumph
of the imagination.*

—W. Booth, *The Art of Growing Older*

All of this mess will look better in retrospect, if we ever get back to retrospect.

—Entry in my journal, 1940

August 22, 2000

Yesterday decided to begin a chapter on Youth and Timeflow (really on Aging). Did a bit [which became a first draft of this chapter]. Phyllis interrupted to ask if I'd be interested in reading a journal entry of hers. First time ever, I think. And reading it, I discovered, lo and behold, that *she* is troubled by thoughts of aging—at 74. She never talks about it much. But in the journal she laments seeing herself in the mirror looking old, and feeling depressed about never getting things done at the proper level of excellence. . . . It was striking—and in some ways even reassuring—to see how much overlap there is between our feelings at this moment: anxiety about achievement, about aging, about how to keep our loving marriage as alive as it once was.

Then we had a fine chat about it all, about how we might work to improve the (already amazingly good) lovematch. . . . We agreed that we can't expect the same *kind* of love that earlier decades yielded: old folks can't pretend that they're still really young—especially as, in my case, impotence threatens. Anyway, the chat made me feel that the “harmony” theme of the book ain't an entire hoax; any couple who could be as close as we are after 54 years, while having as many signs of aging on both sides, has had amazingly good fortune—and of course Vain-Booth must add: deserves an amazing amount of credit for the achievement.

December 10, 2000 [Chicago]

A big snowstorm today, the kind of storm that would have thrilled me almost uncontrollably from childhood until—well, let's say until about fifteen years ago. I loved walking in snow, shoveling snow, throwing snowballs, holding my face up to falling snow. Writing to Phyllis from Paris, early in 1945, I reported the sheer bliss that snow can yield:

When it snows in Paris, I love you. Even when the snow turns to slush, I love you. But when, as today, it remains beautiful, when it remains snow, I love you immeasurably. . . . This storm has been something special. Starting yesterday afternoon with a quick burst of



Relaxing at Villa Serbelloni, 1976

snow of the kind that we used to say “makes good packers,” it settled down by night into a slow, beautiful, dry snow. The streets were made wonderfully slippery, and I had the uniquely undignified pleasure of ignoring the Parisians on the Champs-Elysees to the extent of using the sidewalks as a slippery-slide. The exhilaration extended almost to the point of intoxication.

Don’t get me wrong, though. It takes a very special kind of snow-storm to arouse my sympathy. . . . Right now I would be willing to romp in the mud if I could be near you while doing it.

But this morning here in Chicago, not fifty years but fifty-five years later, the old man whom he [back then] predicted emerges. As I go out to shovel the snow, I do at first suddenly feel a pale version of the old thrill: it is so beautiful! But then, as I start shoveling and go on to sweeping, with

my back in pain, my left knee throbbing, my breath a bit short, I catch myself muttering, aloud, “This is awful; I hate winter.” Then of course I think again about that initial thirty-second thrill, and I remember the many times, like the Paris moment, when I felt sheer exhilaration.

I stop shoveling, breathe calmly a bit, looking about at the beautiful patterns of snow on the trees and roofs, and the thrill—a pale version of it—returns. But I do not, could not even pretend, to go get the skis from our basement and do some cross-country skiing on it. And I suddenly remember the crazy risks I took when young, as I reveled in snowfall in the mountains.

In episodes like that one, diverse young Booths and the reluctant old man live together daily, sometimes quarreling. The old man judges the young man or boy as foolish, often even stupid; the young man, confined to a weaker voice because of having to rely on memory, pleads with the old guy to go with the flow: think young even when old. Only rarely do they join, as they do right now, looking out at the heavy snowstorm, and both find it thrilling.

Almost everyone who has written about old age has noted how emotions shift about; youthful desires and achievements fade—most obviously the lustful ones. But writers too rarely note how diverse pleasures rise and fall and rise again, depending more on accident than choice. The oldster whose hearing has been lost suddenly rediscovers visual art; the newly blinded one rediscovers music and audio tapes. The old fart who has not cuddled an infant for decades is suddenly overwhelmed with the discovery that—as a friend put it to me—cuddling a “new grandchild is the deepest pleasure I can ever remember.”

LOSSES AND GAINS

Some of the changes, as I’m ambushed by age, are almost too trivial to mention. Should I confess here that even though I’m still pretty good at aiming a bit of spit at a sidewalk crack, I am not quite as accurate as I was when my young friends and I competed in that game in American Fork? (Obviously I shouldn’t report it, since nobody with any gentlemanly decency ever spits on a sidewalk!) Need I confess that I’m predictably a bit more wobbly on my bike than I used to be? Should I bother you with the decline in all five of my senses, hearing worst of all?¹ Should I repeat my dubious claim that my cello playing is “getting better all the time,” as I go on taking lessons but feel my fingers stiffer and stiffer? Should I report my outlandish senior moment of

1. Fortunately the new hearing aids cure that one, partially, and my listening to music is not badly impaired.

yesterday when my careless cash recordings convinced me that our bank balance was nine thousand dollars higher than it actually was? Should I include journal entries like the following?

March 15, 2002 (Phyllis's birthday)

Both of us feeling gloomy this morning, in spite of a fairly good session last night playing Brahms sextets. . . . The fact is that my mind just doesn't work as efficiently as it once did. . . . It takes me longer . . . to work out an essay outline: far more rambling, far more temptations into the irrelevant. . . . My mind, not just my typing, substitutes an irrelevant word for the word I intend to say . . . "waifer" for "waiter" . . .

April 17, 2002

Why am I, in addition to feeling despair about the world, feeling so disorganized, muddleheaded? . . . Maybe some secret virus has hit—but I don't feel physically ill: just mentally distraught. Stupidly anxious about . . .

As I run through the scores of other entries I'm astonished at how the gloomy ones outnumber the blissful reports. That's always been somewhat the case, but obviously it's increasing. Why am I more tempted to sit down and record feeling "logey"—my youthful term for melancholia—than to record feeling blissful? Isn't the answer obvious? When you're experiencing a genuine "high," why bother to interrupt it with writing about it? And when you're feeling "down in the dumps," "grumpy," "lost in the woods," you will often find that writing about it helps wipe it out.

To me the most mysterious sharp loss of ecstasies is in my response to visual art. I didn't fall in love with art as early as music. Until I was in my late teens, painting and sculpture were never on our landscape.² Our schools taught a great deal of music, no painting or art history. Music was our only artistic center. We had no good museums in Utah, and I can't remember being taken to visit even poor ones, if indeed there were any. Then, sometime in my freshman year at BYU, I chanced on a book reproducing, as its title offered, "One Hundred World-Famous Paintings" and felt my life transformed.

August 2, 1940 [a few months after living with the book]

Yesterday I bought two picture frames (dull silver, a little too gaudy but the best in town within my price range) and put "The Avenue," Hobemma, or is it Hobbema?, and "Man in Armor," Rembrandt,³ in them and hung

2. Phyllis as editor: "Pun intended?" Author: "Isn't it obvious, dear?"

3. The attribution to Rembrandt was questioned many decades later.

them up. It is one of the most important things that have happened to me for—well, in all my life. I had in my hands “100 World’s famous Paintings,” and I was crazy about them. I picked out the above two pictures as among my favorites, and decided to hang them up. I didn’t realize that a picture is doubled, tripled, in value when hung in plain sight in a good frame, over what it is worth in a collection to be glanced at cursorily now and then. Every time I come into my room I get a thrill. . . . I believe that after having looked at them both 500 times, I will like them even better than I do now. Then I shall carefully pack these two and frame two more, until I get about 25 of the ones I like best. Then I’ll start over. . . . I feel like a boy with a new bicycle; a husband with a new, no, not wife, child; a child with a new doll. I keep having to look at them to be sure they are still there.

Reading that today I’m startled—and envious. Nothing like that could happen to me now. Oh, yes, we do go occasionally to art museums, and once in a while I’ll get some real pleasure from paintings, as I did at the recent “Gauguin–Van Gogh” and “Manet and the Sea” exhibits at Chicago’s Art Institute. Visiting the Ashmolean in Oxford with Phyllis and daughter Katherine “educating” me about how to look at some paintings by totally unknown Renaissance artists, I found it all—well, I can’t say exciting, but it was rewarding. But the passionate commitment to seeing, the embrace of the visual, the longing to visit art museums—these have somehow diminished. And as I think about it, I suddenly long for the green age that could yield that kind of passion. Whatever happened to it?

September 4, 2001

I’m delighted to report a slight revival in visual interest. I was invited to give a talk at our Art Institute, on how artists (poets and painters) deal with aging. Preparing the talk, I had to run superficially through my art book collection, and through the galleries of the Institute, and my former fascination with art was quickly revived. We’ve been going to the gallery more often since then.

Longing for lost passion for art doesn’t usually extend to a longing to go back to those youthful years. I’m pretty sure that the boy who loved those extremely inadequate reproductions had far more miserable moments per day or week than I do now. In fact, whenever I “wish I were younger,” the wish takes me back to the middle years, not to adolescence. At the same time I envy the vigorous excitement of that young man. Even my current love of music, still strong and rewarding, doesn’t lead me as often now to sit down and listen as steadily as I did then—often in tears. Only our chamber

playing rivals those early years of ravishing discovery. Musical bliss has not just remained with me but in some ways increased and deepened as our chamber playing has taken over.

What about literature? Well, I have to confess—feeling ashamed—that “great literature” grabs me somewhat less than it did when I was twenty. Partly because of my writing life, I spend far fewer hours per day reading than I did when young. Many a novel that thrilled me then I find unreadable now. *The Magic Mountain*, which had been a page-turner when I was nineteen, was sometimes almost a chore as I reread it recently; it took me perhaps two weeks, as other books kept intruding, some of them equally slow going. While it’s true that some of the novels I had found boring when young excite me now, such as *Great Expectations* and *The Wings of the Dove*, the general temperature has gone down.

The same is almost as true about works by thinkers I’ve admired or even tried to emulate. As I write this paragraph in winter 2005, I should be reading some more of Aristotle’s *Ethics* in preparation for a class tomorrow. I was startled earlier today by how impatient I sometimes felt as I read my “assignment”; passages that bored me today had thrilled me in my twenties and thirties.

LONGING FOR MATURITY VS. LONGING FOR YOUTH

What interests me even more than such declines is that these days I don’t experience nearly as many moments longing for youth as I did back then longing to be older—or at least to *appear* older. I wanted to appear more mature, more masterful. In my generation, unlike today, “mastery” was possessed only by the older ones.⁴ But can’t we count as a gain the fact that one spends less time now *longing* to be different?

More seriously, I find my grandchildren and my college students much of the time *rightly* exerting their mastery over me—mastery not just of computer techniques but also of a vast range of cultural matters that “everybody who is anybody” ought to master. They hear music on the radio and recognize the singer; they read *New Yorker* cartoons that depend on jargon I’ve never heard, and then have to teach me what’s funny. The truth is that today, for the first time in human history, to be old is to be lacking in what is widely seen as essential education in the “wisdom” of your particular culture. It’s not surprising that so many of us old farts spend a great deal of time and energy and money putting on youthful masks.

4. Today the elderly are on the whole viewed not just as economic but comic burdens. If you don’t believe me, just tot up the comic butts on TV and figure out the proportions.

As a kid, the masks were all flashed in the other direction. I was always sure that if I could just appear older, everything would be better for me.

The silliest masking occurred when I was about seventeen. It was obvious to me that people who wore eyeglasses were more mature than those who did not. Since I was failing, always, in my effort to get on sports teams with my contemporaries, I had few resources for *appearing* older, so I decided—I'm sure without thinking about it quite as directly as I am doing now—to get eyeglasses.

The doctor said my eyes were OK. I told him about all the pain I experienced when reading. He finally gave in and prescribed a pair, which I went on wearing much of the time each day throughout college, posing not just as “older” but as “more scholarly” than almost everybody else. (At the same time, the hypochondriac in me, the man who knew that he could never live longer than his father had lived, feared that his eyesight was indeed failing. And after a while I became genuinely myopic.)

The books I actually read are full of penned comments in the margins. In *The Magic Mountain*, I find page after page of attempted dialogue with Mann. He concludes the book with “Out of this universal feast of death, out of this extremity of fever, kindling the rain-washed evening sky to a fiery glow, may it be that Love one day shall mount?”—and I find on that final page this judgment on Mann—and on me.

7/31/40: [Mann's statement is] up to now, a futile wish, or surmise. worth re-reading many times. The conversations of Naptha and Settembrini are priceless anaesthetics—if I may coin a word:⁵ the constant attack at formerly taken for granted viewpoints, first by S. & then by N., is stimulating, to say the least, and to say it poorly.

It is a magic book, more magic than the mountain.

A Classic.

Who is the young man's implied audience there? Is it intended for me, reading it more than sixty years later? I think that though the enthusiasm is genuine, the motive for *writing* about it is a bit silly: show your maturity. Someone will read this someday and be impressed. In fact as I reread the book now it's clear that much of it must have been unintelligible to me then—classical allusions, long passages in French and some Latin, neither of which I had studied.

I could go on through the years tracing the “maturity urge” into the effort to appear as a fully learned scholar. Surely growing my first beard at

5. Phyllis and I have trouble figuring out what the kid means with his coinage. Is it just playing with “anti-aesthetic”?

thirty-five had some of that in it; in England for a year, I wanted to look more scholarly.

But then, somewhere along the line, my posing began to work in the opposite direction. No longer “I’d like to be older” but “I’d like to be—and appear—younger.”

When did that reversal occur? Hard to say. It doesn’t appear in the journals for decades. Rather, one finds “philosophical” speculation about time and how it flows, as in this one.

Sept. 9, 1940

About the end of every summer I get a sudden feeling of the fleeting quality of time—summers go so rapidly.

Of course, he is unconsciously aware, having lost so many loved ones, of how life itself goes rapidly. But he never mentions the effect those deaths have had on his thinking.

Summer 1942

It is this farewell to summer, that has gone so fast, that gives such a beautifully sad quality to Autumn. When I think back on certain fall days, I get a tightening feeling in my stomach that is poignantly pleasant. . . . I can’t, for some inexplicable reason, become nostalgic thinking of past summer or winter days, although they seem to be pleasantest in my memory (at least strongest), but almost any fall or spring day I have ever noticed . . . causes the above mentioned nostalgic tightening. What is it?

Then, after tracing some memories of “highs” in nature,

Back to the fleeting quality of summers. . . . A whole summer . . . takes less time to go through than, say, a day of dusty windiness. . . . Now the mountains are coloring autumnally, and I become aware that in addition to my own method of marking time [the journal entries] . . . there is the old intruder, Time, with a very large capital T, marking time with loud taps of his foot, very very impatient, very very uncompromising.

School, that generally dry, occasionally fine and spicy, imprisoner of mentality, is about to begin. And the Freshmen, with their almost fetal look underneath their almost octegenarian pretenses, will be cluttering up the campus and my Time. I am old before my time, young after my time.

The desire to appear more mature did not wipe out all anxiety about growing old.

Feb. 21, 1941, 10:30 PM

Tomorrow, in a couple of hours, I will be twenty years old, which will be something entirely new, as near as I can tell, in my life. I don't feel comfortable about it; in fact, I feel rather sad and ill at ease over the fact, which is, nevertheless, incontrovertible and inevitable. I feel old, and a little tragic—I feel that what I have planned and am planning as a successful, happy life is going to be tragically unsuccessful and unhappy.

But of course, such an attitude is unnecessarily theatrical, juvenilly (sp?) so.

My mood of frustration (sexual (?)) will pass, and I will be happy in my life—I will be. But my very determination to be happy is likely to defeat me, just as my determination to get only the best girl for a wife is preventing me from getting any girl at all. By the time a man, happy or unhappy, is twenty, he should have accomplished a certain amount of fetal preparation, at least. (Mendelssohn had written *Midsummer Night's dream Suite* by 17). I should, then, take stock of my "accomplishments," file them, and gird up my loins for continued assault at the abandon-all-hope gate of success.

I don't feel like taking stock—I feel like crying—I have felt like crying a lot lately for the first time since my emotional reversion at about 12 years. I laugh and joke, but melodramatically enough, I don't feel all that I show.

(It feels good, here in 2005, to see that young guy anticipating chapter 3 on how the griever masked his grief.) Then,

I am young, and I shouldn't be hunting furiously for a wife—I should be playing unconcernedly rather than worrying senilely (to coin a word). I really cut rather a ridiculous figure, hopping about the feminine landscape, peeping under bushes, up trees (family), chasing diffidently, hopelessly, but always chasing doe after doe, nearly catching one, becoming frightened or disappointed and changing my already erratic course to follow another, a little more diffidently, a little more hopelessly, on into my thirties, forties, and finally visiting my friends and their daughters & sons—I say, returning to a lost original subject for this sentence, that I cut a ridiculous figure, but I don't believe, really, that I do. I am not ridiculous—I am Wayne Booth, the best catch any girl will ever get. The line forms to the left—don't crowd: but no line forms, there is no crowding. I am not recognized as a catch, but I don't laugh at me. Ha!

. . . Birthdays do give one to think.

The first serious, far less jokey worrying about aging occurred when I was turning thirty. Four months after my twenty-ninth birthday, I received the Ph.D., and we moved to Haverford College. I suddenly found myself often

feeling—well, just plain old. Phyllis was pregnant with Richard, and we were having no lovemaking. I had no real project to replace the passionate drive of the dissertation. Suddenly life seemed to have no point. The journals surprise me even now with the roller-coaster ups and downs.

November 27, 1950 [Haverford]

So I'll talk about my own miserable mood these days. It is miserable, in general. No zest for life, no interest in my daily chores, no great feeling of anticipation for the future. . . . And the old subjects no longer excite me. Discussion gets nowhere, activity gets nowhere, unless it can be joyful, which mine no longer is. I never really needed a God, or a reasonable substitute for a God, until now, and I was never in less of a position to be willing to accept one. About the only thing that could save me would be a love affair, and yet really, I love Phyllis as much as I could possibly love anyone. The general feeling is: you have your academic goals, you have your personal goals, you have your intellectual goals, all attained, or if not attained, at least carefully and hopelessly defined. What you are to be is quite clearly settled, once and for all. You are nearly thirty, and you might as well be sixty.

What can tear me out of all this I don't know. Perhaps some big success with the writing I'm doing—but the writing I'm doing will never, barring unjust accidents, produce any stir. It's just not worth that much, even the novel [*Farrago*].

Yet, with all this, I am plagued with . . . annoyance that I'm not "getting anything done." If I were consistent, the above mood should make me at least indifferent to "success," and yet I lust after success and esteem more than ever before. My detestation for my new boss, for example, goes far beyond what he deserves.

I don't remember how often through that year I felt that way, only that there were decisive moments of crisis when I repeated, "What on earth can I do with this life, now that I am no longer young?"

THE "IF ONLY" DRIVE

Reading now my many accounts of feeling both childish and "in my later years," I'm struck by this frequent message, sometimes explicit: "If only I could turn back the clock"; "If only I could start over and get a genuine education." The overt message is often cheerful and futuristic, with no mention of the past—only "I gotta improve beyond what I am now." Sometimes it is almost despairing; my life is over, and it's a mess. Both directions imply a longing to be able to turn the clock back and start over.

Fortunately I don't often suffer these days from the "if only" syndrome. I feel that my life has been so fortunate, so lucky, so blessed with the right choices and chances that I only very rarely find myself wishing, "If only I had done this or that—if only I had kept on writing novels, etc." The most absurd "if only" I can think of is when VainB says, "If only you had worked harder at publicity, hiring an agent, you could be more famous now . . ."

These days, it's mainly If Only I Were Still Younger, or Could Appear to Be!

I can remember no such moments, through my forties, fifties, and sixties, of hypocritically posing as younger. There were a few times, as I turned thirty-five, when I would catch myself in absurd fantasies about life being over; no man should or could live longer than his father had lived.⁶ But at forty I had the thrill of enthusiastic response to my first book. Sudden "achievement" made me feel very young and mature at the same time! Through my fifties and sixties I was comfortable with being fifty or sixty.

Since I was feeling totally happy in my marriage, I never allowed myself to "come on" to any of my female students or colleagues, and I had no motive to put on youthful masculinity. A couple of times when an especially attractive student was graduating and leaving, I would say to her something like "I want you to know that if I were not happily married and if I were twenty or thirty years younger, I would have courted you." That was not posing as younger than I was but as actually a bit older than I felt.

So it was only into my seventies somewhere that the hypocritical wish not just to be but to appear younger came on the scene. The pose was aided by having a white beard and white hair that went on looking roughly unchanged over two decades. I didn't look a lot older at eighty-four than I had looked at sixty-five—unless the looker got up really close to see the skin behind the beard and flowing hair. These days far too much effort is spent on hiding the diverse forms of "limping." HypocriteB behaves in conversations as if totally vigorous and cheerful, even when feeling worn or depressed. (Phyllis says that pose often doesn't work for her; she sees the depression.) I pretend to have heard a fellow diner's comment and invent a response that attempts to hide the non sequitur.

As I think of that posing today, comparing it with my youthful efforts to appear older, I think it's maybe a bit more defensible, more useful to the world. Those youthful efforts to look older did nothing for or to the world, except perhaps negatively—making others feel put down. My elderly posing is usually a way to keep "the world" itself more cheerful, less despairing: Hypocrisy-upward, right? What would be the good of letting my grandkids see

6. Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* deals wonderfully with this problem: how a man is to deal with being older than his father.

my moments of despair? Then suddenly ThinkerB rushes in here—what on earth is the good of letting them, or anyone, read about those moments?

In any case, by now, at eighty-four, it is no longer simply a hypocritical pose. It is (but only part of the time) a genuine longing to be younger than I am—not to go back and live my life over, but to recover what life felt like at, say, forty. I could do things then that I can't do now. I could feel things then that I can't now. The range of possibilities in life usually felt broader and richer then than they often feel to me now. (For example, though I've always felt overwhelmed by the number of unread books on my shelves, books that ought to be read, back then I had some future in which they could be read. Now time is running out; how many books can I expect to read before I die? Even if I were to rival that French woman who lived to 126, could I even re-read all of Dickens, whose *Dombey and Son* recently took me about a month to complete, partly because of my preoccupation with this *LIFE*?⁷)

The strongest “if only” drive occurs when I think about unfinished projects. *If only* I had completed that really splendid project “Yielding,” about how diverse religious positions might deal with grief. *If only* I had completed “A Modernist Repents,” a “brilliant” presaging of the better forms of some postmodernist critiques of modernism. *If only* I had had the guts to ignore the editor's rejection of the proposal for a book on “Fee Speech and Free Speech.” *If only* I had finished *Cass*—and so on. What a fine author I could have been!

Suddenly LusterB snarls, “How come you've never mentioned ‘If only I could repair my impotence?’” To which ThinkerB cheerfully replies, “Have you forgotten how wonderfully the aged Cephalus answers when Socrates asks how he deals with ‘the threshold of old age?’” And then VainB whispers, “Don't forget to cite the passage; it's *Republic*, 329! Remember how impressed you were when you read it in 1946!”

When Sophocles was asked, “How about your service of Aphrodite, Sophocles—is your natural force still unabated?” he answered, Hush, man, most gladly have I escaped this thing you talk of, as if I had run away from a raging and savage beast of a master. I thought it a good answer then and now I think so still more. For in very truth there comes to old age a great tranquility in such matters and a blessed release. When the fierce tensions of

7. A recent survey that has had considerable media attention claims that a vast majority of Americans consider themselves brighter, more mature, happier than they were in the past; the subjects also claim that most other people, in contrast, are fading. I suspect that the interviewers carelessly neglected us oldsters; all of us know we are fading. Except, of course, in the moments when we are constructing new and better Selves in our autobiographies.

the passions and desires relax, then is the word of Sophocles approved, and we are rid of many and mad masters. . . . If men are temperate and cheerful even old age is only moderately burdensome. But if the reverse, old age, Socrates, and *youth* [my italics] are hard for such dispositions.

With sex properly dismissed, how about the potentially boring subject of memory loss? Everybody I know over age fifty complains about an increase in memory problems. Whenever I find myself lamenting memory loss, I find comfort in a memory that some oldsters lack: the absent-minded professor can call up strong memories of memory failure from the earliest years on. Am I more forgetful now than I was at age ten, when Gramma Booth told me to invite Mama and sister Lucille to a dinner celebrating my birthday—and I forgot about the invitation? No current senior moment embarrasses me any more than that one did.

Or how about this one as a GI in Paris, March 5, 1945? After writing to Phyllis about a curious band concert, I reported,

I finally got to the library [where I had been headed before getting distracted by the public concert]. Yesterday I had left a pair of pants there, which I had had laundered and was taking to be pressed, forgetting about them until I was back here in town. So last night I phoned, with the officers and GI's laughing the while, and explained to the French woman at the library desk that I had left my pants, "mes pantallons," on a bench. All sorts of obvious wisecracks were made at this end of the line, and the girl on the other end laughed, too, but she did find them and promised to save them for me. Today when I arrived and asked for them, the girl said, "Oh, so you're the famous man who left his pants in the library." "Yes, but fortunately they were an extra pair." "That's what we all wondered about." And, blushing just a little, I took my pants and made an overly graceful exit.

So, back to the second journal entry at the beginning of this chapter: Why should I here today, after shoveling heavy snow for fifteen minutes, curse myself for forgetting to turn off the burglar alarm when I came back in the house? Par for my course? But the comfort doesn't carry very far. I have to admit that when I was thirty, if I'd wanted to name the author of "My Last Duchess," I wouldn't have had to wait for ten minutes before I could suppress the name Matthew Arnold and call up Robert Browning. And what was the name of the guy who wrote *1984*—oh, yes, Lionel Trilling—no, wait a minute. That can't be right. Yesterday in a conversation about politics, I had to pause for about five seconds after I referred to Bush as Gore and couldn't remember the name of our unmemorable "President" Bush.

“Senior moments” thus fill our lives, but it is still a comfort to remember many similar junior moments throughout my life. The truth is that I’ve always explained them away by claiming, arrogantly, that “My mind is always on higher things”—even when the “thing” was actually “higher” than what my mind was dwelling on. Can one take pride in resembling that ancient Greek philosopher who became comically famous for falling into a cistern because his entire being was concentrated on studying the heavens?

DEPRESSION?

What I’ve said so far understates my many gloomier moments about aging. Though much of the time I feel buoyant, almost “young again” (especially, VainB intrudes, after hearing yesterday that a beautiful young colleague had told another young colleague that she sees me as handsome), I must record a melancholic moment or two.

July 18, 1999 [shortly after considering the possibility of a LIFE, to be called “Another Summing Up”—echoing Maugham]

For a few weeks I’ve been almost completely free of outside pressures, and as I’ve battled within myself about just which “free” path to choose, I remember my fantasy in college: my ideal life will come when I can live in a tiny apartment, with a desk and typewriter and some bookshelves, with nothing to do but read and write.

It’s not quite true that these days I have *nothing* to do but read and write: I have my life with Phyllis and our music playing [a list of musical events follows]. . . . All of that has filled a few hours with focused, joyful playing. But what feels awful about these weeks, and especially the past three or four days, is a rising number of moments of just plain miserable self-loathing: not just melancholia or ennui or apathy or boredom or doleful dumps or blues but something approaching the current medical meaning of “depression”: a really dangerous and perhaps unprecedented low. . . .

Enough for now. I’m tempted to find a therapist, because it would be wrong to go on with these angry outbursts, and this sense of miserable self-loathing. . . .

Well, the truth is that this vile “meditation” has me feeling considerably better than I did a while ago. Often, when I’m surveying possible “cures,” I think of joining or rejoining some congregation (actually attended LDS Sunday School last week), or at least daily meditation (Spinozist prayer). . . . Why can’t ZenB drive me (note that keyword, drive) to meditate for an hour daily, and exercise for an hour daily, and get rid of this absurd “drive” to accomplish something, every minute.

Along with the occasional self-loathing and despair about losing powers, I have inevitably experienced what almost all oldsters do: a strong sense that the world is going to hell in a handcart. Here's how I put it in summer 2000.

Though the surface, in America, is perhaps more cheerful than ever,⁸ the path we're on is into total doom. . . .

I admit that such Doomcalls are always absurd, even when they turn out to be justified: they're absurd unless the calls themselves have a chance, as none these days has, of averting the doom. Noah was right when he shouted to his kinfolk, Git on that boat, right now! But I have no boat, the world has no boat. As Machiavelli is said to have said, and as I have reported ten times here and there—after he had traced doomcalls over the centuries, “The difference is that this time the call of doom is real.” In sum: the path of “capitalism,” “consumerism,” “militarism” (we still have hundreds of nuclear weapons aimed at Russia, and they have 'em aimed at us, while we go on fiddling with an impossible and absurdly threatening missile defense system)—but there I go, instead of getting down to “work.”

Actually it's not hard to think of “youthful” moments when despair about the world made even more sense than now. Here's how I put it on January 1, 2001, when the media were full of apocalyptic predictions.

Nobody in America can possibly feel as doom-ridden as we all felt in 1963? [1962, that is], as the Cuban crisis came to a head. I was certain that the nuclear bombs were about to fall—and that we could do nothing about it. (My family did not follow the many who built, and even dwelt, in bomb shelters: we knew that would be useless.) When Kathie, then thirteen, asked me, “Daddy, are we going to have war and get bombed?” I hypocritically tried to smile and said, “Oh, certainly not, Kathie; just don't worry about it.” While my stomach was churning with fear. She remembers spotting that I was telling a lie.

Almost equal doom-fever hit us and our friends way back in 1948 when news of the Soviet atomic bomb arrived. One couple we knew and admired made a deliberate decision never to have children, because they knew every child would be incinerated by the Soviets. Perhaps even more discouraging was life in the early forties. I was fairly sure that the Nazis

8. A bit amusing, that, as I revise over the years and on to winter 2005, with all of the depressing events since 1999: stock losses, corporate crime revelations, hatred of Americans mounting around the world, the scene in Iraq looking more and more like a genuine quagmire. If and when this book comes out, will things look better or worse? Two Selves within answer in total contradiction.

would win the war; the end of life as we loved it was near. I remember looking at our refrigerator and wondering, “Will they deprive us of *that*, because of our having fought them?”

I must then ask, Shouldn't any doomthinker just get down to work, instead of shouting “the end is nigh” on some street corner? Yes, because he has known for decades that sooner or later the world *will* be annihilated—by asteroid, by environmental pollution, by sun decay, by fire or ice—and he has long since declared that the importance of *now* does not depend on the importance of *then*. The point (LOVER and ZenB almost snarl at me) is not to hope for any prolonged future; the point is to live today and leave the fruits in the hands of a “God” who is “simultaneously” creating other planets, some of which will discover the good things that we've discovered, and also the bad things, and then get destroyed while yet others are created. Some creatures on those other planets will discover, as I have, a sense of gratitude to this eternal “Range of Possibilities and Powers”—Supreme Being—and then they'll get destroyed too, while others are “created”; and some clever prophet will get in touch with “God,” invent some “Gold Plates,” and become famous publishing a book about how . . . And so on.

Now, then, do I show this to Phyllis or save it for her—or someone—to read after I die? Should I just scrap the whole chapter? I think so. Anyway, for now I'll just ask her to give me some therapy time. And the Zen Buddhist in me will go right now and meditate for a while; then LOVER will practice the Brahms G major, then exercise, with both of them chanting at the old fart's allowing himself to be plagued by ambition and pride, “To hell with that achievement drive. Live the life you've been granted; leave the fruits in the hands of Spinoza's God, who created it all in the first place. . . .”

Or I might resist all that and just follow what many an aging hypocritical philosopher has advised: “Pursue only the more affirmative side, as you did in the last third of *The Art of Growing Older*, tracing more of the blessings than pains tied to getting old. Act younger and you'll feel younger.”

