Old Age Progress of A Retired G.P. Five Years Ago.

Maurice T. Root, MD
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In 1973 through a letter from Prof. Frances Scott you published an autobiographical sketch of my later life into the eighties. Here, five years later, is a report of the interim years which, though less physically active, have been fully as occupied by intriguing experiences involving many old and several new friends.

Degenerative states in various organs have slowed me down. Deafness is severe though I'm still benefitted modestly through electronics. Deterioration of the labyrinth has made my gait more unsteady but I can walk a mile with a cane in less than half an hour on a cold, windy day with no angina. A compensated congestive heart failure permits me to climb two flights without difficulty, more easily if I over-breathe at the start. Conventional diuretics prevent edema. The reduction of physical activity has hastened demineralization of bones and several collapses of vertebrae have required prolonged rest to promote healing and pain relief.

Abnormalities Treatable

These disabilities are enumerated to show that today's medical know-how can correct to a degree many disabling geriatric problems. At present I am perfectly comfortable, able to eat and sleep well while my bowel behaves reasonably well despite a tendency toward diarrhea due to extensive surgery on the gut fifteen years ago. Until lately almost any one of these conditions would have been disabling and disheartening but luckily I can ignore most of them while trying to build up the myocardium and body musculature by special, easy exercises. The ravages of the years are responding to fairly inexpensive management in my own home.

My physician wife, a year younger than me, with the help of a college student granddaughter, so far furnishes all the necessary care except that in July, hospitalization for eight days was essential to rectify paralytic ileus associated with one of the vertebral collapses.

Even these transient disabilities have interfered little with a continuing exchange of ideas with several dozen new and old friends and with some thirty odd of my offspring. Written communications tend to have a bit more meaningful content than casual verbal chit-chat so deafness may actually be useful.

Mental Deterioration Slower

My mental processes deteriorate much less rapidly than my physical ones. Solving word puzzles and cryptograms which I have used as a continuing measuring device for years finds me nearly as competent as ten years ago. It seems possible to understand what is read just about as well as ever, and ideas of others, expressed with style, still give me the old thrill. If any change in my writing facility has occurred I believe it has improved. Certainly I get more pleasure from the act. As many observers have noted, even memory can be improved with practice but here I find an occasional hiatus in a chain of thought lasting several moments but returning to normal shortly. As most of us also have discovered, when a name, place, or incident is forgotten often it flashes back when concentrating. If not, usually the recollection flares up from an apparently subconscious search within a day or two. Voluntary effort may improve the recall when I practice it but I tend to forget to practice.

Sexuality

Sexuality remains at about the same level for the past two or three years. My wife has tried to help me eliminate guilt feelings for irregular behavior in this field but a lifetime habit of thinking can't be overcome quickly. I do get much pleasure from sexual fantasies which provide most of such gratification now.
Aims Reduced in Number

When starting the systematic recording of old age experiences some fifteen years ago several specific objectives were conceived. These have gradually simmered down to three:

(1) Promoting the "Planned Autopsy," trying to convince medical schools that much more can be learned to link anatomy with bodily functions by having meticulous studies and records made on those courageous volunteers for dissection than from haphazard post mortem studies.

(2) Attempting to analyze my conclusions from years of medical practice to help show our descendents how to develop happier, more productive and more satisfying lives, emphasizing specially the value of genetic traits in addition to the forming of health promoting habits.

(3) Trying to improve my own comprehension of what consciousness is through general reading but also through observing and keeping a record of my own dreams and their relationship to my regular conscious activities. This has been a particularly fascinating effort which has familiarized me with the concept of various states of consciousness.

Satisfactions Have Been Outstanding

All of these projects have necessitated establishing give and take with well known, knowledgeable men and convincing them that my ideas had sufficient merit to warrant their response to inquiries. As a result I correspond with several widely recognized specialists hitherto unknown to me: a stimulating opportunity for one so restricted in getting about.

One further extremely gratifying outcome of my personal exploration of the phenomenon of aging has evolved from several of my published articles describing my findings. About a dozen brilliant, inquiring young students, scattered around the country, have written to inquire or argue about my thinking, three of them my own grandchildren. They seem so interested that I feel justified in expecting them to carry on some of my lines of thought.

All of these unique pleasures and satisfactions, arising at this time of life, seem to have derived from the scheme I set up at the time of my partial retirement to consciously observe and record "the years of my diminishment" as Teilhart de Chardin called them. Instead of a pastime or hobby it has turned into a new period of learning which I term my post-retirement education.

Quite certainly the excitement of each new discovery together with the most fortunate persistence of my unusually happy married state have resulted in prolonging a not yet unproductive life. Wise medical guidance has contributed much.

The prolonging has been very enjoyable not only in general but also in simple, ordinary sociability. Yesterday our daughter with two of our three sons savored a delightful dinner in a country inn 30 miles from home. We gathered from our house, from Florida, from Massachusetts, from Northwestern Connecticut, a united, happy family.

And I do not fear dying, the subject on which I have volunteered to report my observations while aging, to Prof. Frances Scott's Seminar: "Confrontations of Death." This is unquestionably true. It is probable that the activities of these late years have brought about this pleasing situation.