

Garrison Keillor

Crankiness in Decline, Says Old Guy

Youth-obsessed America has made it tough to age with crabby, righteous anger

THERE'S A NEW SURVEY OUT SAYING THAT PEOPLE WHO take a positive view of aging actually live longer than those who grouse and grumble, which is hogwash, and I am paying no attention to it. I turned 60 last week and it's no picnic, and anybody who says so is whistling in the dark. Maybe this doesn't sound life-affirming to you. So—shoot me.

I didn't want a 60th birthday party but agreed to it under pressure lest I be thought a sorehead, and so all my jowly friends with thin dead hair sang *Happy Birthday* in their horrible ruined voices and we sat eating aged beef and heirloom tomatoes with a dry but experienced Chardonnay and old pals woofed about how happy and busy they are in retirement and gave me dumb birthday cards ("Welcome to the Incontinence Hotline ... Can you hold, please?") and a cake blazed up like the Hindenburg and some people I knew back when they were fun told me how good I look.

Back in the 1960s, birthday parties were major fun. The Grateful Dead was on the hi-fi and you danced and took powerful drugs and swam naked in the lake and lay on the sand talking about what you were feeling. But I can't do that anymore for fear of embarrassing my children.

This week, as a gift to myself, I'm going to Scotland.

Turning 60 is darned awkward in America. We glorify carefree youth and feel sheepish if our abdomen is not hard enough to crack walnuts on and our heart is not warm and smiley. Geezers and geezerettes go around in juvenile clothes, shorts and flip-flops and jokey T shirts (MY GOAL IS TO LIVE FOREVER. SO FAR, SO GOOD). Embarrassing. A man my age should not aim for boyishness. He should wear an old tweed jacket and wool trousers and a silk vest with a great belly under it and have wild eyebrows the size of rats and carry a knobby walking stick and smoke torpedo cigars and sit around kicking the bejabbers out of the government. A guy can do that in Scotland.

In Scotland, old codgers like me don't buy into the fairy tale that these are the Best Years of Our Life. They know better. If life is a journey, then your 60s are the homeward leg when you're hung up in an airport and thinking bad thoughts about your travel agent. Your shoes have been x-rayed, your flight is delayed, you're trapped in a lounge full of idiots with those dangly cell phones and voices like chainsaws. You'd like to tell them to get lost. But in America we've seen a serious erosion of the right to be cranky. Ordinary grumpiness has

been marginalized by blatant moodism, symptomized, pathologized, made to seem like a bad thing. Oprah is to blame for this, and the whole Onward & Upward, Little Engine That Could industry that has made smiliness obligatory. Look at the Clintons.

Here are two folks who spent eight years being attacked by midgets and now have fat contracts to write memoirs in which they could pound on their enemies and throw gravel at them, and will they? Will it be Payback Time? No, it will not be. They will say that those eight years of persecution only deepened their faith and drew them closer as a couple and made them realize how terribly lucky they really are.

In Scotland, memoirists would be expected to lacerate their enemies and rain garbage on them, and if you raked in \$18 million doing it—bingo! more power to you. A wonderful dour tribe, the Scots, and the right to groan and moan is sacred in Scotland. Here we have been duped out of it by the people who gave us aromatherapy and seaweed wraps.

Face it: a nation that maintains a 72% approval rating on George W. Bush is a nation with a very loose grip on reality. And a man who turns 60 and tells you he never felt better is delusional. He has forgotten how it was when your whole being leaped and bounded, before you turned into a lumbering galoot. Nature is relentless; it programs degeneration into our DNA. Even if you're positive-

thinking, hopped up on Viagra, and your face has been lifted and stapled to make you look like a feral woodchuck, nonetheless one day you'll look like something from the lost lagoon and have the sex drive of a smoked salmon. Nature doesn't care about your golden years; it's aiming for turnover.

You don't get to be old by putting on a happy face. What keeps you going is stubbornness and righteous anger: at ugly buildings, suvs, background music, the eminence of nonentities, at cravenness and cruelty in general and the shamelessness of this government—leading the lynching of a few corporate scapegoats to distract the mob from your own sins—the naked hypocrisy of it! If you're not brave enough to have morals when you're 72% popular, what hope is there for you? Give the bastards a hard time: that's how you get to be old. But why am I telling you, bubby? Grow up and come back when you know something. ■

