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Age-Old Truths

By Mitch Anthony

“What reasons has he to envy a young person? For the possibilities that young person has, the future that is in store for him? ‘No thank you.’ He will think ‘instead of possibilities, I have realities in my past—not only the reality of work done and love loved but of suffering suffered. These are the things of which I am most proud—though these are things that cannot inspire envy.”

—Viktor Frankl, *The Doctor and the Soul*

If you are one of those individuals who finds themselves speaking apologetically about their age—stop it! I mean it. Anyone who happens to be lamenting turning 40 or 50 or 60 or 70, zip up that piehole. Who brainwashed our culture into believing that age correlates to insignificance, to exhaustion of personal resources, to irrelevance? I suspect that corporate cultures and retirement policies have exerted some influence on these ageist opinions. How our culture has worshipped youth through the decades ... and yet, the last I checked, youth is replete with confusion and ignorance.

One’s age, as Frankl so poignantly stated, is like a treasure chest of realities experienced, family and friends loved, work that has brought value and, yes, times of suffering that have shaped us. As we age, we know who we are, we know where we’ve been, and we know what we can do. Wisdom and experience are difficult to quantify, but this I know for sure—these values have worth in the marketplace. Age, rather than speaking of cultural insignificance, should speak of elevated significance. Rather than speaking of the exhaustion of personal resources, age should speak of the collection and multiplication of such. We

don't have to become less as we age; we can compound in our later years. Just like the magical effect of compounding on our wealth in the later years of saving, the wealth of knowledge and experience compounds in the third season of life.

Recently, I received a note from Rebecca Horn of R.M. HORN Financial Management in West Linn, Ore., about her 86-year-old father, Kenneth Horn. My guess is that you may be as inspired by this story as I was:

"My father is still practicing dentistry at 86 years. He doesn't work full time, of course, but he covers calls (emergencies) for two other offices, fills in seeing patients full time when they are out of the office, consults on cases that are challenging, shares his knowledge, wisdom and techniques with other dentists. "About once a month he works a full day in a free dental van, seeing patients who otherwise would not be able to get dental care. It's a long, grueling day with no breaks.

"He was recently certified by the FBI in forensic dentistry in case of another major terrorist attack with multiple casualties, which included rigorous self-study and in-class sessions. He still works a day or two a week in 'his' office (he long since sold his practice to a young dentist) because he enjoys it and he still has patients who insist on booking appointments with him.

"He regularly attended a 'study group' at the dental school, where they studied difficult and challenging cases for the last 40 or so years. He talks about 'retiring' permanently, but he is so mentally and physically fit and active that I doubt he will give it up as long as he is capable of doing it."

The above description leaves no doubt that Ken Horn is an amazing example of successful aging. Add to the above the facts that he also flies his airplanes, rebuilds old cars (he has several), rebuilds airplane engines and walks at least a mile every day. Did I mention that he likes to bake as well? Rebecca informed me that her father bakes a phenomenal chocolate chip cookie and sends batches to friends, family and co-workers in several states (and is expected to show up with them when he visits anywhere).

Contrast this lifestyle with the all-too common sedentary, ever-constricting existence that is eventually reduced to watching Vanna spin the wheel—and it becomes apparent that how one chooses to advance with age is a critical attitudinal query. The first question one must answer is, "How will I regard my age?" as Figure 1 illustrates.

Figure 1
Study from the American Institute of Financial Gerontology
How old do you view yourself at these ages?

<i>Age of respondents</i>	Young	Middle Aged	Old
55–64	6%	78%	15%
65–74	9%	43%	48%
75+	7%	26%	67%

The “Ken Horn” attitude is growing, as there are more people 75 years old who see themselves as “middle aged” than there are 64-year-olds who see themselves as “old.” Clearly, the bottom line is how you see yourself. That view influences every other decision you make regarding your expectation to flourish or flounder in the aging stage of life.

Until recently, scientists paid little attention to psychological development in the second half of life, and those who did pay attention didn’t always draw the proper conclusions. “About the age of 50,” Sigmund Freud wrote in 1907, “the elasticity of the mental processes on which treatment depends is, as a rule, lacking. Old people are no longer educable.” Freud was 51 when he wrote those words but ended up producing some of his best work after 65. We are just beginning to learn how powerful the proper attitude toward growth and possibilities impacts us as we age.

I have to admit that I have been guilty of violating this attitude—lamenting and grouching about landmark ages as I passed them at 40 and 50 and saw youth sliding in my rearview mirror. My wife, thank goodness, will have none of it and corrected me on the spot on both occasions. Her first husband died at 23 years of age, and her answer to any age-related whining has always been, “Hey, you’re alive, Pal. What else do you want?” It’s hard to argue that perspective. Sometimes it’s hard to hear, with all the noise of age-related creaks and not-as-limber limbs, but when you hear that coin drop, you realize that the next stage of

life is a vista of possibilities backed by decades of experience—an advantage we definitely didn't possess in our youth.

I wrote to Rebecca Horn to ask permission to write about her father and she added these facts about him:

“He learned to ski in his 40s, took guitar lessons and started to learn to play the piano not too many years ago. Just spoke with him today and he is at ‘his office’ because the new digital X-ray machine is being installed, learning how to use it. Never stops learning. The list goes on ...”

And this is a seal of the attitude that refuses to conform to stereotypes about age; people never stop learning. Curiosity is the driver of this new species of octogenarian. For those who awake with curiosity, the possibilities never end ... and the list does indeed go on and on.]]

Mitch Anthony is widely regarded in the financial services industry as an expert on building client relationships and has been recognized for his pioneering work in Financial Life Planning. His innovative tools for strengthening client relationships are available through his Advisor Insights™ at mitchanthony.com.