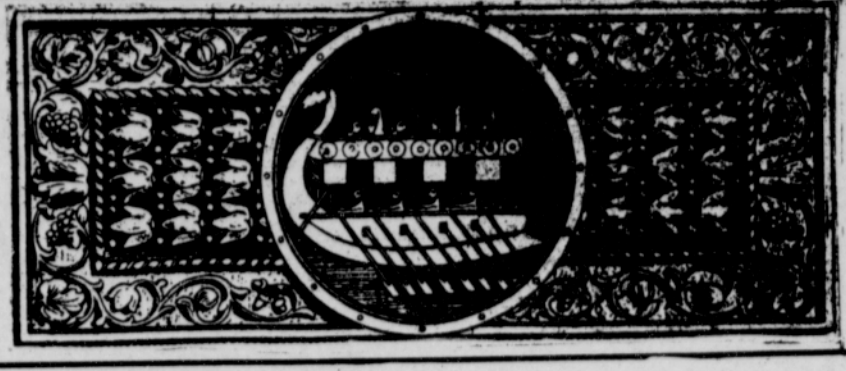




# LIFE & TIMES



## AN ANCIENT PRESCRIPTION FOR OLD AGE

by Ed David

Reaching old age is an achievement though some of us regard it as a catastrophe. We try to postpone it as long as possible not only with lotions and creams but with semantics and other devious means. ("Men and women are as old as they feel". . . "Old age doesn't begin till sixty-eight. . . seventy-two. . . seventy-five. . ."). But all the semantics and perhaps some of the lotions would be unnecessary if we looked upon old age as the ancients did. They praised it as a condition of life to be accepted and enjoyed as a blessing.

"Blessing!" you may exclaim. "What blessing? The ancients regarded old age as a triumph because so few could reach it in those days. The few who did soon realized that it was not something to 'enjoy'."

True enough, in part. Old age was a relatively rare occurrence until our own era but the ancients welcomed it as a time of contentment.

Consider what Cicero, writing some two thousand years ago, had to say in his famous essay on old age. At sixty-two he felt that he was not yet old enough to speak in the first person, so he presented an imaginary dialogue between a distinguished earlier Roman named Cato, age eighty-four, and his disciples.

Cato freely admits to being old but vigorously denies being in any way disadvantaged by his condition. Every stage of life, he says, has its own character. Kids are callow, youths aggressive, middle age is dignified and old age mature. Each quality is to be harvested in its season. Cato easily dispenses of those who complain that the old are necessarily cranky or forgetful or mentally dull or physically infirm. If someone is churlish, he says, the problem is not age but character. That person can discipline himself to avoid bad temper and churlishness, and life will become much more worthwhile. As for memory, it becomes weaker with age only if one does not exercise it. Cato remarks that he himself has no difficulty remembering people

Ernst-Ludwig Kirchner



and events of long ago. "Besides," he adds, "I never heard of an old man forgetting where he had buried his money!"

There is also no reason to believe that old age dulls the mind. Mental exercise, says Cato, keeps the mind alert, for example running over in your thoughts each night all the events of that day: what was seen, what was said, what was read.

As for being infirm, some people are and some are not. Cato recalls an ancient king — Masinissa of the Numidians — who at age ninety was making long journeys on foot: "Once he starts a trip afoot he never mounts, and he goes bareheaded in the coldest and stormiest weather."

Clearly, says Cato, a person's physical strength diminishes with age, but far from being a disadvantage this is all to the good. The pilot of a ship lets others climb the masts and work the pumps while he sits quietly at the rudder. "He is making a more valuable contribution because great accomplishments are not the result of brute strength and speed but of thought, character and judgement, and these, far from diminishing, actually increase with age."

We have to bear in mind, Cato tells us, that to deserve respect "old age must have its foundations well laid in early life. . . White hairs and wrinkles cannot suddenly usurp authority, since this only comes as a final result of well-spent earlier years." Otherwise, the whole concept would be open to ridicule of the kind Finley Peter Dunne heaped on it: "Many a man couldn't direct ye to the drug store on the corner whin he was thirty will get a respectful hearin' whin age has further impaired his mind."

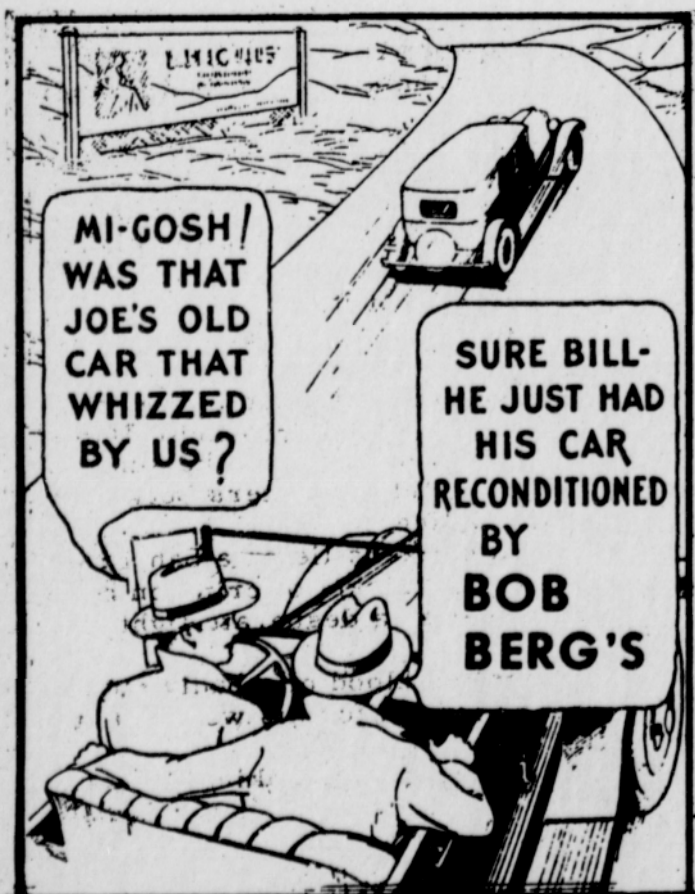
Most of the early thinkers, especially those who arrived at ripe years, thought as Cato did that old age was the apogee of a good life, an ascent not a decline. Seneca was an exception — he called old age "an incurable disease." But Hippocrates, Plato, Pliny, Marcus Aurelius were enthusiastically positive.

Hippocrates, physician that he was, noted that old folks are less prone to disease, although once established disease is harder to cure for the old.

Plato, in his Republic, spoke of the "great sense of calm and freedom" that prevails when "the passions" relax their grip.

Pliny, who was an acute observer of life in Rome, tells about an aged ex-Governor named Spurinna who at age seventy-eight fights off the physical effects of his years with a brisk game of catch every day. "In age," Pliny writes, "when business is unseasonable and ambition indecent, all should be composed and uniform. Spurinna cultivates his mind and keeps his body vigorous and active, showing no sign of old age except wisdom."

Marcus Aurelius saw "a certain maturity



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