

and comeliness" in well-preserved old man and women.

The ancients were devoted observers of the human condition and their value judgements on what constitutes the good life apply to civilized men and women without regard to time and place. In important respects their judgements differ from our own. For example, the pursuit of pleasure which we support on a lavish scale was not considered by ancient thinkers to be a desirable standard for living. When Cato was told that Epicurus regarded pleasure as the object of life he prayed to the gods that all Rome's enemies would become Epicureans, for this would make them self-indulgent and hence easier to defeat. It's no loss to the old, says Cato, that their material pleasures are diminished. "Age has no banquets, no tables piled high, no cups filled again and again. So it also avoids drunkenness, and indigestion, and sleepless nights!"

Sex? The ancients assigned a much lower value to it than we do. Someone asked the aged Sophocles if he still had sexual relations. "Good heavens, no," he answered. "I have gladly made my escape from that barbarous, savage master."

Cato approved. Enough is enough, he said, and if you don't miss being without it, that's best of all.

Cicero, perhaps because he was only sixty-two, was more permissive. He freely admits that youth is the best time for enjoyment of sexual pleasure, but he insists that old age "is not wholly deficient in this." Then, in a suggestive if not entirely apt analogy, he compares the



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situation to a theater where the spectators in the front seats get the most out of the action onstage but those in the back row also enjoy the performance.

Unlike our belief today, the ancients thought of "the passions" — sex, ambition, competition, aggressiveness — as less satisfying than intellectual pursuits. Surely, says Cato, "the satisfactions of the mind are greater than all the rest."

The satisfaction of the mind. The pleasures of reading, study, contemplation, conversation, writing: those are the worthy pursuits. There was strong emphasis on sports and physical prowess in classical times — note the many sports events of our day that reveal their classical origins in such names as marathon, decathlon, discus. But the ancients put wisdom first and foremost. When they described the ideal as "mens sana in corpore sano" they were advocating a healthy body for the sake of a healthy mind which they thought of as the highest good. Their idea has much to recommend it as a prescription for contended aging. But before joining up be sure you are old enough and committed enough for the long haul.

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A LITTLE RED SPOT

by Paul Barkman

FROM A LETTER:

SUNDAY MORNING

The mail doesn't go out until tomorrow, and as I read over some of the news items in my letter, I thought of a couple more in the Old Friends category.

It seems there was a minor crisis at Saint Joseph Hospital about three years ago. Nurses were complaining that some old geezer in one of the rooms was copping feels. One nurse explained that the old fart was close to ninety but he had hands like an octopus. Yep, Wes Cornell was getting ready to check out on his final journey, but he was going out grabbing. Every time a nurse jumped he let out a cackle. Well, he got all the mileage possible out of his years. He died a couple of days later.

I saw him last in Susanville about ten years ago. He and Mrs. Cornell lived in a very comfortable old two storied house that had belonged to her parents. Each morning the old buzzard would make his rounds along the back alleys stopping at various back doors for coffee. The Widow Brown, the Widow Jones, etc. He would come back home in the middle of the morning all coffeed out. Mrs. Cornell said that "coffee" was going to do him one of these days. . .

He was still slinging it at that time. He had

been a cowboy there about sixty years earlier, and I guess they had to get decent citizens off the street and bolt things down when Wes Cornell rode into town. When he told the story about the Indian, George said it was a flat lie. Wes claimed he rode into town, saw a squaw, galloped after her and lassoed her. The Indian turned and yanked up a leather skirt and screamed, "Me no squaw. Me buck. Look!" George and Keith usually just looked sad whenever he told that one.

Anyway, he cashed in, but there was no sadness. He lived his life unafraid, and he died unafraid. Good old guy.

Mrs. Cornell. One day the doctor came out to the house and told her she would have to be moved to the hospital. She had some kind of heart trouble all her life and it had reached the point where she would have to be put in a room with a bunch of tubes put in her and the whole works hooked up to some machinery. He left some pills with her and said they would come for her in a few days.

The next day she called the doctor and told him something like this: "Doctor, I am over eighty years old. All my children are grown and happily married. All my grandchildren are grown and happily married with children of their own. I have had my place picked out for some time where I will be put to rest. I do not intend to be hooked up to a bunch of tubes and motors and pumps which will cost money that will have to come from my family. So goodbye, Doctor, and thank you. I just threw the damned pills down the toilet."

Then she went to bed and a couple of days later was gone. The family said they were proud of her.

I hope when my time comes I can be unafraid like those people were when they got ready to check out.

That brings to mind some personal reflections. Once, when I was going to different doctors trying to find the cause of my problems, a doctor noticed a red patch on my shoulder. He said he didn't like the look of it and had me lie down while he cut a slice of tissue out of it. Biopsy. I was calm. Then it hit me. One out of four. Cancer. So, my god, I was going to be one of the statistics. The doctor told me he would call me after the tests. I went back to my trailer in a very reflective mood.

Then I became very calm as my thoughts went something like this: Every time I had been to Stockton over the years I had picked up the "Record," and there was a picture of someone I had known who had cashed in. Guys my own age, and I had wondered what caused the big roulette wheel to stop on their numbers instead of mine.

My mind went back to a vacation Jane and I had taken at a place called Driftwood Shores, which is near Florence, Oregon. Beautiful place overlooking the ocean. I woke up one morning around three and looked out over a moonlit ocean with the waves breaking. For a long time I studied the view from the balcony, and believe me a scene like that, not a sound except the wash of the surf, makes a person think. I looked

out in the direction where more than thirty years before, in 1944, I was on a patrol boat heading for the base. Daylight was fading and we saw a huge troopship coming toward us. It had come out of the Columbia River and was about fifty miles out and really working up speed. Smoke was pouring out of the big stack and the rails were lined with hundreds of khaki-clad Army guys. Hundreds of them, all staring at us or looking back toward land. We watched that big thing disappear in the dusk over the horizon. No one said a word for some time. Then a guy named Frisbee said to me, "You know, Barkman, a lot of those poor bastards will never see this country again."

That shook me. And he was so right. A lot of those young guys are over there at Iwo Jima or Okinawa, forever. I had to think of the fact that every one of them would have been willing to trade places with me on that patrol boat which hardly ever got out of sight of land and never heard a shot fired in anger.

I looked out over the moonlit ocean so many years later, standing on a balcony and wondering how I had been chosen to have an easy, comfortable live of over half a century instead of being one of the guys on that big troopship that was on its way across the Pacific to war.

So I had a little red spot on my shoulder. Big deal! If this was it, well, what makes me any different from other people who have become statistics? Let it come, I thought.

Three nights later the doctor woke me up in the middle of the night to tell me the red spot was some kind of old allergy. No problem at all, he said. Go back to sleep.

If I have any choice I would like to go out like old Wes Cornell. Spend my last able years keeping the Widows Brown and Jones happy and then cop feels off the nurses even while they have the gurney waiting outside the door. Or if something like the red spot appears and is not harmless, go out like Damon Runyon whose last words were: "Oh there you are. I didn't see you waiting. Just a second, let me get my hat and I'll be right with you."

Unafraid.

Paul Barkman, following service in the Coast Guard at Astoria during World War II taught high school for more than twenty years and afterward worked on cattle ranches in Northern California. Last year he returned to Astoria.

