

Postponing Middle Age

I read it in a fashion magazine, so it must be true. Fifty is the new 30. Or did they say 40 is the new 20? Or maybe 30 is the new 10? No—that doesn't sound right.

Okay. I can't remember exactly what they said, maybe because I'm somewhere past the new 20. But I do recall the point of the article: Middle age isn't what it used to be. I know it isn't what it used to be for me. In my youth, I saw those who were 40, 50, and beyond as wise, mature, and . . . well . . . old. Now I'm 49. But I'm not wise or mature yet, so it follows that I can't be old either.

(By the way, I know it was once considered embarrassing to admit your age as I have just done. But my generation doesn't think of age as something to be self-conscious about like previous generations apparently did. And anyway, how do you know I'm not lying?)

For many of us in the demographic, middle age isn't a term we feel accurately describes us. Unconsciously we intend to live forever, which makes middle age irrelevant. Even the less optimistic among us plan to live a very long time; we just don't plan to get old. And we come by our delusions honestly. We have available to us improved health care, teeth whitening, laser eye surgery, liposuction, Botox, and plastic surgery. We can eat exotic fruits and vegetables year round, wear sunscreen, and work out at the gym. We don't—but we can.

Daily we hear the songs we danced to at our high school prom on the radio, on television shows, and in the movies. This would make us feel even younger than it does if they weren't always referred to as "the oldies."

Likewise, seeing youthful figures wearing the same peasant tops and hip-hugging bell-bottoms that we once wore keeps us feeling "hip," though saying "hip" is probably not "hip" anymore. Some of us never were hip—though we do have hips. And they explain why we aren't all wearing the hip-hugging bell-bottoms of our youth.

We have other concerns besides our hips, of course. We're worried we're growing less hair on our heads and more in our noses. We've started to believe in the benefits of napping. And real or imagined, we've begun to perceive the scorn of the younger generation, to whom we are quick to point out, "You know, you'll be this age some day too—unless I kill you first."

And of course they will be this age, and maybe that's what keeps us from total denial about the fact that we are aging. People far younger than we are keep getting older.

Almost since we graduated, my college roommate and I have met for an annual weekend somewhere between our two cities. And, I swear we never change. Or so I thought. But this year, something was different. At our recent meeting, my college roommate had just welcomed her son home from his first year of . . . college.

Suddenly I began to notice signs that maybe we have changed. We didn't always bring sweaters into restaurants in the middle of the summer. We didn't always have trouble reading the fine print on the menu. There weren't always prescription medicines on our hotel nightstand. And I'm pretty sure there was a time we thought elastic waistbands were only for sweatpants.

But generally we middle-agers believe that we will not be middle-aged until we say we're middle-aged. And that might not be until we're 70. Seventy is the new 50 after all.

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