



Seven Ages

"Ages of Man," State Library of New South Wales

*All the world's a stage... And one
man in his time plays many parts...
His acts being seven ages.
Shakespeare, As You Like It*

PHILOSOPHERS HAVE PONDERED the subject of aging for millennia, often conveniently (and somewhat arbitrarily) dividing the stages of a human life into ages.

Aristotle counted four, but as religious ideas began to dominate philosophical thought, lists were usually ordered in sevens, most notably in the 'seven deadly sins.' By the Elizabethan era, it was a familiar concept, and one which Shakespeare deftly employed in his play, *As You Like It*.

In the play's famous "All the world's a stage" monologue, the character of Jacques describes the seven stages of life that all men experience: infancy, boyhood, teenager, young man, middle age, old age, and dotage.

Despite *As You Like It* being considered a comedy, Shakespeare's depiction of an individual human life is undeniably tragic—an unrelenting progression from helpless infant "mewling and puking in the nurse's arms," through reckless, impassioned youth, a middle age marked by vanity and conceit, and the inevitable ending in senility: "sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."

In Shakespeare's time, there was little one could do to delay the aging process, with medicine based on leeching, herbal remedies, astrology, and—if all else failed—prayer.

The average lifespan was a mere 31 years, and—even having managed to survive the perils of birth and childhood, along with frequent plagues and epidemics—a vigilant 20-year old could expect to live no longer than his mid-60s. (Alas, no *Midsummer Night's Dreaming* about golf for Jacques.)

While we haven't quite yet eliminated aging altogether, we do know that people age at vastly different rates, depending on genetics, diet, stress, lifestyle, access to medical care, and various other factors, most of them up to the individual.

People now know that one's 'calendar' or **Chronological age** alone is a very poor indicator of either expected longevity or quality of life in one's later years.

Of much greater impact on health and longevity is **Physiological age**, our physical vitality as measured by various biological markers in our cells and tissues, many of which do not rigidly obey the calendar. (Recent studies suggest that less than 10% of a person's expected longevity can be attributed to genetic factors or heritability.)

Closely related is our **Apparent age**, or how young or old we look to ourselves and to others, which can also vary widely among people of the same age. (Just ask anyone who has been to a high school reunion.)

In turn, appearance can effect one's mental state, what we might call **Psychological age**—a measure of our mental and emotional well-being, reflected in how old or young we feel and act. (We're all familiar with the saying, "You're only as old as you feel.")

Whether said out of defiance or denial, another common expression among older people is "Whatever your age is, 'old' is always ten years away," and in fact, studies show that on average, elderly people feel eight years younger than their calendar age.

These four aspects of aging combine in what gerontologists call **Functional age**, a measure of how one functions in daily life.

Humans are, however, for the most part social animals, and since modern society has a distinct bias toward youth, we can't overlook the social dimensions of aging.

We also live at a time when—despite huge advances in medicine and the resulting increase in lifespans—people in general are overweight, overstressed, and victims of all sorts of unhealthy addictions and habits.

As a result, our ideas about how one might be expected to look and feel at any given age may be distorted by a **Societal age** 'normal' very different from how a typical healthy person of that age *should* look and feel.

More importantly, all these different ways of viewing aging assume that it is something that happens to someone—to a *person*. Advocates of 'non-dual' spiritual traditions might argue for a transcendent, seventh age, one which we might call our **Spiritual age**.

A spiritually-realized person is aware that his identity as a 'person' is a kind of illusion, and our limited, ever-changing sense of self is hardly the full measure of our being.

We've all known people who seemed like 'old souls,' although exactly why we sense this may be difficult to rationally explain. As Milan Kundera wrote, "There is a certain part of all of us that lives outside of time."

Such a person might be said to be ageless, glimpsing a kind of immortality. (Although it must be emphasized, there is no 'person' there to 'experience' this, at least not in the way we normally define these concepts.)

The pitfalls of aging need no enumeration, but if there is anything to be gained in the bargain, it is the wisdom that one can accrue over time in a consciously lived life, and there is perhaps no greater wisdom than this.

As *You Like It* manages to end on a happy note, with its two star-crossed lovers happily wed, hardly Macbeth's "tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Who is to say that—provided we can transcend our illusory, limited sense of self—a happy ending can't be ours as well? ■