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Life’s Unavoidable Hardships

There’s no denying that many individuals dread, and even fear, old age. It can seem like old age brings plenty of trials and tribulations that would be entirely avoidable if humans could simply age in reverse. In fact, Mark Twain, reflecting on his old age, even said that “life would be infinitely happier if we could only be born at the age of eighty and gradually approach eighteen.” Though ending life in the state of an eighteen-year-old seems like an ideal situation, F. Scott Fitzgerald saw that plenty of issues would rise if this were the case. He wrote *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* to show that going from younger to older would not reduce the hard times that humans encounter as we journey through life. This short story was then adapted into a movie, which further demonstrated the struggles of progressing through life in the opposite direction. The movie, also called *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, highlights this by showing the struggles that Benjamin Button faces as he lives out his life in reverse. The film clearly shows that Mark Twain’s idealistic view about the euphoria of aging in reverse is ill-considered and impractical.

When Twain said “life would be infinitely happier if we could only be born at the age of eighty and gradually approach eighteen,” he was simply trying to say that life is more enjoyable at eighteen years old than it is at eighty, and that it would be wonderful to spend life approaching the joy of eighteen instead of the eminent hardships of eighty. At eighteen years old, one is typically healthy and physically capable to do whatever they like. An eighteen-year-old has a world of opportunities within their grasp and few substantial worries in sight. However, an eighty-year-old is generally fairly limited in terms of what they can physically do. Although they have learned many valuable lessons throughout their long lives, they have also undergone significant hardship and pain. By saying that life would be happier if an individual’s age progressed from eighty to eighteen instead of the other way around, Twain was probably wishing (in his own old age) that he could go back to the worry-free days of his youth, in which he had the world at his finger tips and had not yet experienced many of the hardships of life.

In the movie, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, the main character, Benjamin, progresses through life in the direction that Mark Twain would prefer. However, Benjamin’s life is most definitely not infinitely happier. Benjamin struggles to form relationships, get a legitimate job, and is surrounded by death from a young psychological age. Contrary to what Twain said, Benjamin’s life did proceed so that he became younger than eighteen and actually passed away at infancy. However, this does not take away from the fact that the film shows that living from eighty to eighteen would not be a happier life. In fact, if one was to analyze the events of Benjamin’s life that occurred specifically within those ages, he or she would find that that time frame contained the majority of his troubles. In general, the film implies that Twain was incorrect in saying that life would be better if it progressed in the other direction.

One may argue that Benjamin’s life would have been much easier if everyone’s life progressed in the same direction as his did. It would not have taken him so long to be able to be with Daisy, he would not have had to leave his family shortly after his daughter was born, and he would be a normal member of society. However, even if aging in this direction was normalized, individuals would still have to go through many of the same struggles that they go through now. Though they would not have to worry about becoming ill or feeble in old age, individuals would still suffer many losses and live through heartbreak. Everyone would be aging in the same manner, but they would still undergo the same difficulties that individuals undergo now as they progress through life.

From my perspective, it is easy to understand why Twain said what he said. However, I ultimately agree with F. Scott Fitzgerald and the film-writers of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. Eighteen is a joyous age to spend your lifetime approaching and anticipating, and it would be a carefree, content stage to be in at the termination of life. However, as the film clearly demonstrated, I don’t believe that progressing through age in the opposite direction would limit the pain and loss that life brings. No matter which direction life progresses, pain and loss is an unavoidable aspect. Additionally, I think it’s important to live through all of the stages of life (in either direction), because each stage contains unique experiences and lessons. Although cutting life short at eighteen would cut out much of the pain and loss, I believe that the importance of the lessons and experiences within the later stages of life outweigh the hurt. Moreover, I think that pain and loss are also important aspects of life, and that the lessons taught by these difficult experiences can be even more important than those learned in happier times.

Although *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* is based on an impossible scenario, valuable lessons can be learned from this film and applied to our lives. This film demonstrates several lessons about aging, the main lesson being that there are parallels between growing old and growing young. As an infant, your physical and mental capabilities are very similar to someone who is nearing the end of their life. When progressing in either direction, individuals gain motor and language skills, and experience both positive and negative aspects of life. Somewhere in the middle, both progressions reach their peak, and then the individuals begin to decline until they lose their motor and language skills and become a geriatric or an infant. In general, this quote and movie relate to our Core Human Questions theme, how then shall we live when the journey is more important than the origin and the destination, because both describe the journey of life. Whether the origin or destination is eighteen or eighty, the most important lessons life holds are those related to experiences in the middle. By changing the direction in which Benjamin progresses through life, the film writers of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* clearly show that the endpoints of life (the origin and destination) are very insignificant and that the most important parts of life are found somewhere in the middle.

References

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