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MONT 105Q

26 Feb 2016

*The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*

As we go through our lives, we acquire unique insights and mature. We experience things that shape our perspectives and affect our actions. They define who we are, who we want to be, and how we want to proceed in life. However, by the time we have collected all these insights, our bodies are worn, and we are often near the end of our lives. Mark Twain once said that “life would be infinitely happier if we could only be born at the age of eighty and gradually approach eighteen.” This idea is explored in the film *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, directed by David Fincher. Benjamin is born with the physique of an old man and essentially ages backwards. The years pass, and while Benjamin grows and matures emotionally and mentally, his body gradually becomes more youthful. This extreme quirk in Benjamin’s life arc proves to be detrimental. Benjamin can never fully relate to the people around him. Those who are his age physically do not align with him emotionally, and those who match his age emotionally are not the same as him physically. Possibly life could indeed be happier if our bodies began at an old age and progressively grew younger, but this could only truly be favorable if others shared in this condition.

In practicality, a reverse aging process, like that of Benjamin, can only be truly beneficial if everyone’s lives follow this cycle. If not, it can be rather isolating. Benjamin’s difference from the rest of society ostracizes him from the moment he was born. His apparent deformities cuts him off from his real father, who can not fathom dealing with an unhealthy baby after his love dies in childbirth. Isolation continues to be a prevalent theme in Benjamin’s life throughout childhood. He is constrained to the front porch of the home; he can look out at the other children playing in the street, but he is strictly forbidden from joining him. Even when he makes his first real childhood friend, Daisy, he is discouraged from being close to her because, to the rest of the world, he appears to be a predator. To the naive eye, their innocent pillow fortress looks like a precursor to an assault. In the following years, his physical age continues to prevent him from being with Daisy. When Benjamin leaves with Captain Mike and the tug boat crew to Russia, he is too young emotionally to have an intimate relationship with Daisy. When he returns, Daisy tries to advance their relationship, but Benjamin is too conflicted to proceed. Just a couple of years later, when Benjamin is finally ready to be with Daisy, she is too busy living the life of a young, talented, wild dancer in New York City -- far from ready to settle down with Benjamin. Finally, in the middle of both of their lives, it is right for Daisy and Benjamin to be together, but this time is fleeting. The two even get a home and have a daughter, Caroline, but, as Benjamin says, “nothing lasts.” Ultimately, Benjamin has to leave Daisy and Caroline because he realizes that he cannot be the father she will need. As his daughter grows up, he will being growing younger. He cannot take care of her when, eventually, he can no longer care for himself -- nor can he put the sole responsibility to care for the both of them on Daisy. Benjamin Button’s relationships were severely restricted because of his condition.

It has been said time and time again -- you live, you learn. Our life experiences allow us to discover the world first-hand and tailor our future actions. We stumble upon realizations that impact and forever change our lives. Unfortunately, many people come to these realizations too late -- they figure out what they want to do but may not have the time nor strength to accomplish these goals. Instead, they suffer from the physical restraints of old age. One could argue that because Benjamin’s physical age works in reverse, he is able to take advantage of decades of experience while still reaping the benefits of a 20-year-old, physically fit body. To an extent, Benjamin does this. He travels around the globe -- backpacking, working, exploring on his motorbike, and really appreciating what this world has to offer. This, however, does not bring Benjamin the happiness and joy he so desperately seeks. He writes in a postcard to his daughter Caroline that;

“For what it’s worth: it’s never too late or, in my case, too early to be whoever you want to be. There’s no time limit, stop whenever you want. You can change or stay the same, there are no rules to this thing. We can make the best or the worst of it. I hope you make the best of it. And I hope you see things that startle you. I hope you feel things you never felt before. I hope you meet people with a different point of view. I hope you live a life you’re proud of. If you find that you’re not, I hope you have the courage to start all over again.”

Benjamin has taken into account all his experiences thus far in life and has decided what matters most to him -- Daisy and Caroline. He attempts to “start all over again” when he leaves India and returns to New Orleans. Benjamin walks into Daisy’s dance studio and sees his love, his daughter, who is nearing her teenage years, and another man -- Daisy’s husband and Caroline’s stepfather. He wants to be a part of their lives, but he can see that they have moved on. Although Benjamin has experienced so much and has come across so many realizations in life, his condition prevents him from being able to put them into practice. He is unable to live out the lessons of his life when he feels the need to do so the most, and this, ultimately, strips him of any true joy his reverse aging could bring.

Indeed our lives could feasibly be enhanced if our bodies began at age 80 and over time approached 18. However, this is true only conditionally. Many issues in Benjamin’s life can be attributed to the fact that he is the only person aging backwards; it makes him different. Differences are naturally isolating factors and prevent us from relating fully to other people. This different is a major barrier in the Benjamin’s relationships, namely with Daisy and Caroline. Still, Twain’s quote could have an ounce of truth to it. Yes, there are potential benefits to a reverse aging process -- such as having 60 years of wisdom contained in a 20 year old body -- but these possible positives are severely outweighed by the detrimental effects it has on one’s relationships. While Benjamin can explore the world and continue to have great individual experiences, he craves a sense of family that he had to leave behind. Ultimately, it is our relationships that bring us true happiness. Thus, Twain’s notion can only be realistic if all people share in this condition; it must be a unifying, rather than isolating, characteristic.