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Sixty is the New Twenty

*The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* tells the story of a man beginning his life where most people end theirs. He is blinded by cataracts, paralyzed by arthritis, and covered in wrinkles. As time goes by, Benjamin’s body grows younger and he eventually dies as an infant in the arms of his true love. One cannot watch this film without pondering questions of one’s own lives and whether or not the “normal” aging process is how it should be. Would everyone be much happier if we grew as Benjamin did, ending our lives as innocent infants? Or are we better off accepting the eventual downfalls of our bodies?

Mark Twain once said, “Life would be infinitely happier if we could only be born at the age of eighty and gradually approach eighteen”. After considering both the reality of our lives and the humor in this phrase, I found myself agreeing with Twain and, with a few changes in the story, I believe Benjamin would too. In the film, the sole reason for Benjamin’s sadness is that he is the only one going through this bizarre process so no one truly understands it. He is forced to watch the ones that he loves slowly deteriorate while he grows younger. However, I think that if this were a more universal process, he would have ended up much happier.

Benjamin and his love, Daisy, meet when she is a little girl and he is an old man. Though there was an immediate connection between them, it takes many years for them to be in similar enough stages in their lives to be able to be together. When they are finally around the same age, they begin an incredibly loving relationship. This relationship, unfortunately, comes to an abrupt end when Daisy becomes pregnant and Benjamin decides not to leave her to take care of two infants, him and their newborn. However, if the reversed aging process were less of anomaly, maybe Benjamin and Daisy could have lived their whole lives together and, as strange as it sounds, have their child care for them as infants rather than elderly before their death.

Aside from the physical differences, Benjamin’s emotional life turns out to be very similar to that of an average person. He has the same experiences and emotions as we do as we grow up; he simply looks older. Along with the obvious feats of learning to eat, walk and talk, Benjamin also experiences the same emotional highs and lows associated with growing up. He goes through a somewhat awkward state of puberty, falls in love, has his heart broken, falls in love again and realizes that sometimes the right thing to do is the most difficult. In the body of a thirty year old, he has the sensibility of a forty year old and I think that is what makes the difference. Benjamin’s mind and body reach their peaks simultaneously.

As we age, it seems that our minds grow wiser and stronger while our bodies move in the opposite direction. We grow smarter, cleverer, and more mature as time progresses. However, by the time we begin to have the slightest idea of what life is about it seems that our bodies are not capable of continuing.  I think we would be better off aging in reverse because we would be wise at our physical prime instead of when it seems to be too late.  We would go through life as Benjamin did. He was born at about eighty years old and by the time his body reached twenty, he had the intellect and experience of a sixty year old.  He was in a position where he could truly enjoy the freedom and capability without any physical complications.  The way our lives progress now, it seems as if we are always a little too late. By the time we become used to our bodies, they begin to decline. When we finally live enough years to feel as if we have somewhat of a grip on our lives it seems that is it too late to act on it.

I think aging in what we see as the reverse may be a way to truly appreciate what we have and live a happier life. Benjamin is born with aches, pains and soreness which soon turned into agility, muscle and energy at the same time as his mind was becoming mature and sharp. Maybe then we would appreciate what we have more if we know what it is like to not have it. He could physically feel the difference in his abilities and it was a positive experience rather than a negative one. We would no longer look back at our younger years and wish we had appreciated our physical capacities or wish we could have known what we do now.

This perspective, however, can lead to questions such as, if we were all to age this way would sixty be the new twenty? Would everyone suddenly wish to go back to their sixty-year-old selves (who have really only been living 20 years) so that they can start over and have such a bright future ahead? Or would we cease to be such a regretful society which longs for its younger and simpler years? This is difficult to tell because, in reality, reversing the aging process is impossible. However, to the extent of my imagination, I think we could be happier and perhaps more satisfied by the lives we have lived.

It is very interesting to think of living life in the way that Benjamin was forced to and there is no denying that the film brought about many questions of life and what is means to grow old (or young). If it was the norm to be born with a body that is eighty years old, everything would be different. Our parents would be thirty while we are seventy and our teachers could look like teenagers. Though I believe that maybe we could lead happier lives if they we essentially backward, there is truly no way to tell. Aside from the imagination  and strangeness of this film, it also lends to more serious point of life and our appreciation of the time we have and the people in it.