

50, smifty: getting old is better than the alternative

By Rick Maier

“Life begins at 40” I wholeheartedly agree. But here’s an adage I like better: the payback begins at fifty. Bring it on.

There are plenty of unpleasant consequences to getting old - the reading glasses, the strange aches and pains, the final realization that you will not pitch for the Braves or win an Olympic gold medal. But sometimes it’s better not to hear everything that people say. The wrinkles, liver spots, raised veins and calcium bumps add character to one’s complexion. Nature must have a good reason to shift our hair growing capabilities from the top of the head to the ears and nose, no?

Getting up at 4:30AM gives us more time to remember where we put things. Gravity’s pull to return our bodies to that beautiful pear shape of our infancy is part of some master plan, right?

Boomers are lucky that so many wonderful scientific breakthroughs are arriving just in time to help us live longer and better – miracle drugs that fight terrible diseases, treatments for allergies and mood swings, and recreational medications that enhance things like, you know, performance.

I particularly like the feature in my car that sounds a chime and displays a message on my dash: “turn signal on?” It knows full well that I left the blinker on for the last mile, but it’s so diplomatic! It could have said: “time to have your eyes and ears checked, old-timer!”

I’ve worked through most of the vanity issues surrounding fading youth - but I still can’t shake one thing a friend told me years ago - that we see ourselves as 10 to 15 years younger than we appear to others. See the picture of me to the left? It was taken years ago and the photographer touched up the eyes. It’s kind of a cheap glamour shot. I guess I look fifteen years older in person.

In June my age became the last two digits of the year I was born, and in many ways I’ve never felt better in my life. The energy I used to spend trying to impress people or accumulate stuff is now spent meeting interesting people and pursuing meaningful activities.

The serious side of aging means identifying our individual health risks, especially the genetic issues. I feel fortunate to not have much of a history of cancer in my family, but my father died of a heart attack at 51 years young.

On July 18, 2002, I'll be the age – to the day - he was when he died. But my grandfathers both lived into their eighties, and I take a lot better care of myself than my father, so it should be just another summer day.

Everyone seems to be taking better care of themselves these days – less smoking and drinking, more exercise and wiser choices such as not drinking and driving. However, Americans do generally seem to be getting a lot pudgier.

One of these years I expect to snap out of what appears to be a perpetual mid-life crisis. Ever since I turned forty, I've been trying all sorts of new things – kids, jobs, stock market rags-to-riches-to-rags, writing, wives, and so on. At least I won't be 80-something and look back and regret having lived a boring life.

Every day I wake up better off than I was the day before. I'm so darn happy to have my health and three wonderful children that I well, I forgot what I was going to say, but it would have been really profound.

There's no sense in complaining. Actress Bette Davis said, "old age is no place for sissies." C'mon, Bette, it's not like we have a choice. You just suck it up and keep going, sometimes searching for the humor in things that aren't particularly funny.

Like a wise man said: "Most people believe that as you get old, you have to give things up. I think you get old because you give things up." Enjoy the journey!