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OPINION: The Longer We Live, the More Time Flies

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(Photo: ~ File photo)

This column goes out primarily to the older folks, the 50 and over crowd, like myself. We know who we are, so there's no use denying it or pretending otherwise. As for the Generation Xers and Millennials, you younger people may also wish to pay close attention.

Do you recall that unsolicited pearl of wisdom our parents and grandparents shared with us at a very young age? It went something like this: *The older you become, the faster the years will roll by, so enjoy your youth and make the most of this precious time of life.*

The probability is that such words or similar offering carried little weight nor sparked even the slightest scintilla of reflection and contemplation in our young minds. Just another example of trivial advice spoken by the "old" folks, which usually fell on deaf ears. But in actuality, that marvelous old adage has teeth to it, is quite prophetic, and also a bit scary. Ask any self-respecting Baby Boomer and older, and they will probably agree. And like a certain amount of people from my generation, I am fascinated by the appearance that life does seem to go by much faster as we grow older. But why?

For more than a century, numerous theories have been presented attempting to explain why the days appear to fly by more quickly with every year that passes. Our own sense of time is actually very complex. The various hypotheses for this phenomenon include a mixture of psychological, scientific and mathematical components which demonstrate our perception of time through the years.

The American psychologist and philosopher, William James, wrote in his 1890 text, *Principles of Psychology*, that time seems to speed up because adulthood is accompanied by fewer and fewer memorable events. When the passage of time is measured by "firsts," the lack of new experiences in adulthood, he argues, causes "the days and weeks (to) smooth themselves out...and the years grow

hollow and collapse.” As the frequent milestones encountered during their youth become less and less, adults have a more difficult time remembering the mundane occurrences from the recent past, resulting in the perception of time (days into weeks, into months, into years), moving at an incredible speed.

Think about it this way. Most of us have clear memories of our preadolescent years when school would let out and summer vacations seemed to last forever. Those precious summer days off eventually appeared much shorter once we reached high school. Then came the middle teen years, the twenties and our thirties, which encompassed an approximate twenty-year span. It was during that integral period when more new “firsts” came our way than we will probably ever experience again on this planet: (first date, first car, first part-time job, high school graduation, legal age to vote, legal age to drink, first apartment, college graduation, first “real” career job, wedding day, first house, and baby makes three and ...). And almost out of the blue, the late thirties arrived and sooner rather than later it seemed, the mid-forties beckoned, bringing a further awakening that time was passing more quickly.

By age 50, our perception of time only accelerated, and then shifted into high gear once we inexplicably reached that impossible age of sixty. And yes, with this came official banishment from the coveted “Pepsi Generation.” (Sorry, pre-Boomers, don’t try to figure this one out. “Come alive, come alive, you’re in the Pepsi Generation!” was an extremely popular 1960s television and radio commercial jingle. It showcased attractive, smiling young people dancing and cavorting on the beach and in their sports cars while guzzling bottles of the sweet stuff. This commercial played on endlessly before you were ever a twinkle in your parents’ eyes.)

There are scientific theories which indicate that our sense of time is also part of the biological processes. Researchers have reported that we experience time as going by much slower when our body temperature is higher. The supposition is that since children have higher body temperatures than adults, they also experience time more slowly.

The psychological theories have to do with memory and emotion and that the passage of time speeds up with familiarity. As we get older, things become more familiar to us, and time slips by as a result. And yet another theory proposes that the feeling there is not enough time to get things accomplished because of too much stress, may be reinterpreted as the feeling that time is passing too quickly.

Mathematical theories for understanding why time seems to pass more quickly with age are equally persuasive. Scientists have utilized logarithms, ratio data, and graphics to explain this amazing phenomenon. Our time perception is logarithmic — stretched out at the beginning and compressed at the end — rather than linear, in which each year has the same length.

The “ratio theory” was proposed in 1877 by the French Professor of Philosophy, Paul Janet. He submits that we are constantly comparing time intervals with the total amount of time we have already lived. This is because the amount of time passed relative to one’s age varies. In its most elementary mathematical formula, for 5-year-olds, one year is 20 percent of their entire life. For 50-year-olds, however, one year is only 2 percent of their life. This provides a plausible explanation why there appears to be a foreshortening of the years as we grow older.

An Austrian graphic designer, Maximilian Kiener, was interested in the concept of time perception for a number of years. He came upon a mathematical formula to answer the question of why time passes more quickly through the ensuing years. This subsequently led to him designing a simple interactive visual graphic based on Professor Janet's theory to share with those less adept at understanding the more advanced mathematical principles. It clearly demonstrates that the passage of time is much like watching something shrink in your rear view mirror. View the accompanying link and patiently take a few minutes to scroll through Mr. Kiener's enlightening graphic presentation:

<http://www.maximiliankiener.com/digitalprojects/time/>

There is no more engrossing account on the subject of time perception and speed to be found than in the superb book, "Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything," by James Gleick, the renowned American journalist and science historian whose work has chronicled the cultural impact of modern technology. The author melds his expert journalistic skills with science and popular culture to produce a collection of brief, thought-provoking essays that the nonmathematician can readily absorb and genuinely appreciate. Here is an example: *"We do feel the rush of time more as we grow older. Then, time does go by faster for us. Perhaps this is partly because the end is nearer. Psychologists have isolated a ""gradient of tension"" to measure the shift in our sense of time as we approach a critical point – the end of a baseball game, a journey, a book, a millennium, a lifetime. Behind all our haste, all that migraine-like pressure to hurry, lurks the fear of mortality. But perhaps the sense of speed comes also from having experienced more. People accumulate responsibilities and time fillers as ocean piers accumulate barnacles."*

I came across a compelling video which speaks well to the entire essence of time. It is a three minute-plus film by John Koenig titled, "Zenosyne: The Sense That Time Keeps Going Faster." While not quite uplifting, it is an eye-opening reminder that life is short and should be lived to the max. View the accompanying YouTube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SNgyEmYyQF4>

If much of this now makes you feel somewhat melancholy, it is understandable when delving into such dysphoric realities as aging, mortality and the passage of time. In a positive sense, however, it should serve as an honest wakeup call to savor the precious time those older family members had wisely counseled us on. In the final analysis, perhaps the magic bullet for a happy and rewarding life is to stay active, focus, limit stress, embrace the age we now are, and look for new adventures, that is, by seeking out "new firsts."

"Maybe there's only one summer to every customer... Maybe you haven't been looking in the right place...try looking ahead." — father and son confrontation scene from "Walking Distance"
— Twilight Zone television episode (1959)

I often call to mind the concise, reflective words of retired New York music radio personality, Harry Harrison. At the conclusion of each broadcast, the popular DJ would eloquently impart this kindly advice to his many listeners: *"Every brand-new day should be unwrapped like a precious gift."* It is a simple but prudent recommendation, certainly something for all of us, the young, and the not so young, to consider when living this life.

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