

BROCK'S BANTER: On Being "Cute"

By Brock Weir

Recent statistics

pegging general human life expectancy at a decline or, at best, stagnating after a steep incline are alarming, to say the least.

It has been said by

experts that, for a variety of reasons ? the opioid crisis, environmental degradation, poor diet, etc. ? the upcoming generation will be the first one with a shorter life expectancy than the previous.

Only time can say

whether this forecast will bear withered fruit, but I guess some might take comfort in the fact that age, and what it means to be a senior ? or, to get right to the point, ?old? ? continues to be on that strange and mystical sliding scale.

Not too long ago,

Freedom 55 was an aspirational goal. It still is for many, but it seems from my armchair perspective that as people zero in on that arbitrarily-decided goalpost, that more and more individuals are balking at the idea.

Retirement sounds

great on paper, some have told me, affording them the chance to travel with their loved ones, something they weren't really able to do working themselves to the bone with their eyes on this particular prize, but, once it arrives, the idea of packing it all in for a life of leisure is daunting.

They feel they have,

so much more to give, so much left still to accomplish in their careers, and the idea of sliding into a well-earned retirement is rather suffocating.

50 is the new 40, they

said. Several years ago. Now, even that seems more of a long shot.

Nowadays, people who

have hit the mark insist that life begins at 50. You have a good decade or three under your belt to make a name for yourself in your chosen field, you've saved enough to buy a nice home and, thanks to the wonders of science or Mother Nature being in on this Dorian Gray-like pact, some on the cusp of the half-century mark are finding themselves with a young or new family to raise.

Yet, while our

attitudes towards aging continue to evolve ? and, in my opinion, evolve for the better ? it doesn't appear that our attitudes towards the aged are following suit.

I think it's a safe

bet to say that many of us grew up with idealized visions of what our grandparents should be. Whether we were influenced by storybooks, depictions on film and television, or the grandparents of our peers, more often than not our shared visions of what constituted being a grandmother as rather idealized: a bespectacled woman, shawl over her shoulders, snow white hair styled into a soft, tidy but manageable coif, possibly a cameo pinned to the neck, who lives for nothing more than whipping up home cooking in the off-chance her grandkids might pop by.

On the grandfatherly

side of things, what kid didn't have a vision of an equally kindly gentleman who spent his mornings in a comfortable old armchair, half-moon reading glasses at the tip of his nose, ready to consume everything he could in the daily newspaper before starting his day ? which, of course, was invariably spent woodworking, handing out hard candies to the kids, or relining a fishing pole before taking little Bobby or Suzie out for the morning catch?

Some of us might have

lucked out in getting at least some of that in our respective genetic bargains, but it's probably safe to admit that the hand we were dealt was much more complex and interesting.

If we were fortunate

enough to get to know our grandparents, we came to find that under the silver tresses, and the odd wrinkle here and there, were true individuals, each with their own life experiences, wisdom to impart and, regardless of age, their own goals for the future.

So, where along the

line do people on the younger side of fifty take leave of our senses and begin treating them like children?

This came up in a

conversation over the weekend when a discussion amongst a group of friends turned to four nonagenarians still very active in public life.

Now in their nineties,

they have been in the public eye for the majority of their lives, making inroads into our public consciousness through various means, including media today that wasn't even a thought when they first started out.

Throughout their work,

they have been at the forefront of our modern life, embracing new technology as it came along, taking it over in a way which worked for their individual style, and mastering the art of communication.

For the majority of

their careers, they were seen as driving forces in their field, the undisputed bosses in their profession, quick to respond, adapt as change demanded, and,

ultimately, individuals not to be trifled with.

All of those things

apply today ? they still have a strong presence in what they do, are exemplars to newcomers in their fields, and still adept to the rapid pace of our modern world ? but, to many people, they are seen as something more. Something that sounds nice on the surface, but when that surface is scratched, is rather more unsettling.

That something is:

cute.

This whole ?cute?

thing seemed to happen overnight. As soon as they crossed a rather arbitrary age threshold, all of a sudden, they were increasingly victimized by volleys of, ?Look at them. They are so cute,? by people apparently keen to disregard the fact they are still vital, forward-thinking individuals, still at the top of their game. By invoking this word, those uttering it veer dangerously close to condescension, demoting a seasoned veteran of life into the same column as a precocious child.

In these particular

cases, I've never really seen them as cute, appreciating them for what they still have to offer the world, which they thankfully do with a regularity that belies their years. In other cases, however, I am ashamed to say I have been guilty, trying to invoke memories of their past rather than giving them a hand, if needed, in being an active member of the present and future.

And, yes, suddenly

finding myself viewing my once vital, active, engaged and present grandparents ?cute.?

With our rapidly aging population, I think we

should all be mindful of this and make a concerted effort to catch ourselves before we fall in the trap, keeping in mind how we would feel if we were suddenly on the other side of that invisible, arbitrary line, and finding ourselves ?cute? in the eyes of others. Personally, I would be mortified ? and I'm bound and determined to do my utmost to avoid the pitfall.