

AGING GRACEFULLY

By Karl Milde

According to scientists, about 117 billion people have existed since humans first appeared, nearly 200,000 years ago, somewhere in East Africa. Believe it or not, about seven billion of these 117 billion people are alive today.

If you're like me, you're glad to be alive *today*, rather than over a hundred years ago when there were no electric lights, refrigeration, radio, television, automobiles, airplanes, cellphones, personal computers, the Internet and satellite navigation (GPS), not to mention the remarkable advances in medicine during the last century.

Consider this:

1. *You're darn lucky to be alive.* As I see it, your chance of being one of the 117 billion who have ever lived has to be *miniscule*. Yes, 117 billion is a large number, but when you divide it by the infinite number of people who *could* have lived (117,000,000 divided by Infinity) this chance is vanishingly small. Okay, but *someone* has to be so lucky, right?
2. *You are super lucky to be living in the present.* Your chance of being alive today is even *less* than miniscule. It is only *six percent* ($7/117 \times 100 = 6$) of the total number who have ever lived here on earth.

Take a look at the following chart*. You will surely find it humbling.

YEAR	WORLD POPULATION	BIRTHS PER 1,000	NUMBER EVER BORN
190,000 B.C.E	2	80	0
50,000 B.C.E.	2,030,625	80	7,856,100,002
8000 B.C.E.	5,000,000	80	8,993,889,771
1 C.E.	300,000,000	80	55,019,222,125
1200	450,000,000	60	81,610,565,125
1650	500,000,000	60	94,392,567,578
1750	795,000,000	50	97,564,499,091

* **Sources as of April 2021:** Toshiko Kaneda, Charlotte Greenbaum, and Kelley Kline, *2020 World Population Data Sheet* (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2020); United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Population Prospects: The 2019 Revision* (New York: United Nations, 2019); personal communication with Dudley L. Poston Jr., Professor of Sociology and the George T. and Gladys H. Abell Professor of Liberal Arts, Texas A&M University.

YEAR	WORLD POPULATION	BIRTHS PER 1,000	NUMBER EVER BORN
1850	1,265,000,000	40	101,610,739,100
1900	1,656,000,000	40	104,510,976,956
1950	2,516,000,000	31-38	107,901,175,171
1995	5,760,000,000	31	113,328,480,171
2011	6,987,000,000	23	115,458,807,793
2020	7,772,850,162	19	116,761,402,413
Estimates:			
2035	8,936,903,068	16	118,854,041,518
2050	9,875,704,167	14	120,974,581,395

By the way, there is merely a *five percent* chance of being born in the USA. The chance of being born in Canada is only 0.5 percent. The chance of being born at all, in no matter in what country, is infinitesimal, so 0.5% or even 5% of that is vanishing small!

So there you have it: After pondering this chart, you may wonder: Why did God give *you* the Gift of Life: your *consciousness*? And when will God take it away?

The Gift of Life:

Think back and imagine your birth. The birth process was so difficult and stressful, you couldn't have stood it if you knew what was happening. Thank goodness you were unconscious so you cannot remember this tumultuous event.

It may have been between your birth and your first birthday that the magic happened. As if a light were turned on, you became aware of yourself and you saw the world with new eyes. You were aware of your existence as distinct from the existence of others. From this moment on you tried to make sense of the world around you.

While this happens to every human, the chance of it happening to *you* is impossibly small. It has most probably happened to you only *once* in the human history of 200,000 years, and it will probably never happen again. Some say they have lived before, and some say they will be reincarnated, but there is no way to prove this. Others say, "You have only one life to live."

The End of Life

We all know that we can't live forever. The average life expectancy in the USA is seventy-eight years. In Canada it's eighty-three years, and even longer in some other countries, like Australia. Living for one hundred years is about all one can hope for.

Thank goodness we can never know in advance when "the moment" comes. We only know that it *will* come some day in the future. Your life, as you know it, will end. Poof!

And then...what happens?

A lot has been imagined, and written, about what happens when you die. At some point your heart will stop ticking, but what about *you* – the *real* you as apart from the corporeal you. The consciousness inside your mind. Is it extinguished too, or will it continue in some way?

Some say your soul goes to heaven when you die. If so, it's getting pretty crowded up there. Subtracting the number of people alive today (7 billion) from the total number of people who have ever lived (117 billion), there are 110 billion people who have previously lived and died.

Perhaps we imagine our souls to be the same size as we are, but that may not be true. If souls are actually vaporous, they wouldn't take much room at all. It could be that all 110 billion of those who have lived and died thus far could fit in the space of, say, a mason jar.

As for me, I'm not counting on my consciousness going anywhere. When the light goes out, I assume it will be all over for me. I've had a great ride but, when I reach the last station on my journey, I'll get off and you won't see me again. Ever.

In the unlikely event that I am reincarnated, I'll have a new family and will make all new friends. However, the probability of having not one, but a chance at having *two* lives on this earth may not be zero, but it is so darn close to zero I don't waste time thinking about it. You shouldn't either.

The only way I can stick around is through your remembrance of me. I'm therefore trying my best to be worthy of any kind thoughts you may have about me. Like everyone, I've had some bad moments, but on the whole I'm a pretty good guy. Just sayin'.

So here's my advice on spending your one and only life on earth:

S.H.I.P.

“Liberals feel unworthy of their possessions.
Conservatives feel they deserve everything they've stolen.”
Mort Sahl

On the political scale I'm a liberal. If you don't like that, you probably don't like me, but no person can please everyone. You conservatives are so darn hard to please anyway.

To be a better person, I've boiled down my thoughts to a mnemonic: *S.H.I.P.* First, I'll tell you the words those four letters stand for; then I'll tell you what those words stand for.

S: Smile a lot. Whether you're on camera or not, it helps to smile. It signals to others that you're happy, and that often makes them happy too. It's infectious.

H: Help others. Caring for others is a given. If you don't care, the selfish you will take over and even you won't like yourself.

I: Initiate stuff. Don't be afraid to take action. After finding a problem, jump in and fix it. Others won't remember what you said, but they'll remember what you did.

P: Be positive. No one, including you, likes a curmudgeon. Don't be one.

Smile at lot

There's this guy, Michael Angelo Caruso, who teaches others how to win friends and influence people. *Michaelangelocaruso.com*. He sends me an email every Friday, called "Friday 5." He's the most positive person I know and, as you'll see in his instructive videos, he smiles *constantly*.

I spent a few bucks and received a personal lesson on how to make a presentation about my pet project: making guns safer. That's Michael's thing: teaching others to "Present Like a Pro." [Present Like a Pro](#) He spruced up my talk – yes, he did – but most importantly he left me with one impression: Smile a lot!

Help others

It doesn't matter who you help, just help *someone*. It's good for the one(s) you help, and it's good for you too. If that's not a win-win, I don't know what is.

But know this: After a lifetime of helping others, it's hard to accept when the tides turn and you yourself need help. But that time will come someday, and you should embrace it with dignity and grace.

To be honest, I'm not a naturally caring person. My years in Rotary, which extols "service above self," has made me aware that I'm quite stingy with my time and money. I don't have a burning passion to provide water, or cookstoves or whatever, to some poor family in some undeveloped country. Although I empathize with those who've had the bad luck to be born to a lifetime of poverty, there are *so terribly many* of them. I rationalize that it would be unfair to help just a few, so I don't help *any*.

But if you're like me in this respect, you realize there are many needs within one's own family. Think often about them often, and check in frequently to offer a helping hand.

Initiate stuff

It's not enough to talk the talk – you have to walk the walk and *take action*.

I'll never forget when I was in prep school, Phillips Academy at Andover, MA, and the school Chaplin mounted an appeal to students to donate to charity. The entire school was required to attend the appeal in the school auditorium. The Chaplin, the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Jr., was a brilliant speaker who later gained fame as the Pastor of Riverside Church in New York City. His appeal was extremely moving and I sat there, debating in my mind whether or not to give. His final words to us were, "*Give until it hurts.*"

To this day, I regret that I didn't give a penny. I rationalized that what little money I had all came from my parents but, in truth, I had a monthly allowance and I could well have responded to the appeal and given something. Instead, I took the easy route and did nothing.

I learned a lesson that day: First decide to do what you think is right, and then actually *do it*. To help you decide, I recommend following the Rotary "Four-Way Test:"

1. Is it the truth?
2. Is it fair to all concerned?
3. Will it build goodwill and better friendships?
4. Is it beneficial to all concerned?

Following its adoption by Rotary in 1943, the Four-Way Test has proven to be a robust guide for making correct decisions.

Be Positive

Life can certainly be rough sometimes, right? Let's face it, as you get older your body sometimes has trouble and it just *hurts*. It's tempting to believe the body won't ever heal and that the hurting won't stop.

Maybe it *will* stop someday, or maybe it won't, but either way one must guard against lapsing into a depressive funk. The medical profession tells us, time and time again, that a positive attitude aids in the healing process.

To age "gracefully" (supply your own definition), being positive and optimistic will help you avoid being a grouch and a "curmudgeon" (in the case of a guy) or a "termagant" (in the case of a gal). Nobody wants to be like that or, if the end has come, to be remembered like that.

Conclusion

So there you have it. I'm trying my best to follow my own advice, but it isn't always easy. In the end, only *you* can judge whether I'm aging gracefully.

THE END