

Something Old, Something New

Written by Jack Sparacino

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Photographer: "I hope, sir, that I will shoot your picture on your hundredth birthday."

Winston Churchill at 75: "I don't see why not, young man. You look reasonably fit and healthy."

[illegible]

I've been deconstructing matters lately, also decluttering. That rack of old ties that no longer see any action is high on my hit list. Good thing, since I'm always looking for more space for all my books. The ties also represent a tie, if you will, to an increasingly distant period when wearing one was common and, frankly, expected in my line of work. They also have old guy connotations for me . . . the tie that binds, in some sense.

The symbols and reality of aging have interested me for over 40 years, starting in graduate school when I took courses on aging and published several articles on geriatric psychiatry before reaching the ripe old age of 28. What a presumptuous whippersnapper, eh? Though in my defense, the journal editors back then probably had no idea how old I was when they read the manuscripts, so logically they had some kid-sized value at least. My faculty advisor, a world renowned sociologist 30 years my senior, apparently thought so. "Old" or not, he labored valiantly every afternoon to kick my butt at squash . . . and sometimes succeeded, rallying hard against my best efforts. And whatever the score, we always had a great time playing. Fred L. Strodtbeck, Harvard Ph.D., Yale and Chicago man, ex-Army guy with the curiosity, verve and energy of a colt. (The '67 Pontiac GTO he drove probably helped.)

I am now older than Fred was when he mentored me in Chicago. We worked well together and it occurs to me that some of the best and most uplifting work accomplished by anyone arcs across generations. Good to recall in these times of nearly incessant, and perhaps media

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induced, strife and friction. Do Americans just argue about politics nowadays or over the way the world ought to be? Of course we don't, but it often takes a burst of reflection if not reminiscing to uncover it. Or just plain reality checking.

It's fun to scan inter-generational horizons when contemplating how darned well old and young folks can work and play together. Examples? Turning first to Hollywood, who can't warm to the wonderful on-screen chemistry of Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and Shirley Temple? Robinson, famed tap dancer and vaudevillian, was born in 1878 (*yikes*) in Richmond. His dance routines with young Miss Temple, born 50 years later in Santa Monica, were rapturously captured for the ages in four thoroughly charming films, including "The Little Colonel" and "Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm."

Depression-era audiences loved to see them perform together and to this day they are awfully difficult to resist, their smashing sunrise-y smiles still able to brighten the sky. The half century age difference between the two was striking, accentuated by rangy Robinson towering over little Shirley. A tree and sapling, swaying in the same Dust Bowl blow.

I think about the Temple/Robinson duets when watching another intergenerational



entertainment force of nature: blues great Buddy Guy playing electric guitar alongside his protégé, Quinn Sullivan. For guitar and rock lovers, heaven on earth can be heard in the Crossroads Guitar Festivals presided over by dean-like Eric Clapton, now 71 himself (egad).

Buddy Guy was born in 1936 in the tiny, backwater town of Lettsworth, LA; young Sullivan in 1999 in tourist friendly and onetime whaling giant New Bedford, MA. The 63-odd year age gap disintegrates into about 63 particles of Dust Bowl grit when these two virtuosos perform together. When they played Guy's signature "Damn Right I've Got The Blues" at the 2013 Crossroads held in Madison Square Garden, time took a coffee break as the two traded soaring

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guitar riffs and broad grins warm enough to melt the coldest sceptic's heart. In fact, show me someone who can't wriggle their soul to that song and I'll show you a (ooh, here comes that man about town fellow again) . . . zombie. Move over, EKG test; scram, brain scan. Your response to this classic will let the doctors know if you're still kicking.

Although I'm about to swear off politics (again) in this column, a terrific intergenerational interview on "The Rachel Maddow Show" also illustrated the tremendous power inherent in bright minds with open hearts working across the decades. Maddow is the host of a popular cable news show on MSNBC. With a doctorate in political science from Oxford University and fierce, effervescent intelligence, she has been a fixture on her network's coverage of the 2016 election cycle.

Always enthusiastic and thoroughly prepared through detailed background research, Maddow conducted a remarkable interview with small bore (ok, obscure) actor William "Bill" Bogert a few weeks ago. He is 80, she is 43. They talked about the striking similarities between the 2016 and 1964 presidential races. Bogert was right in the thick of it in '64, questioning in a long television ad back then his ability to continue to identify as a red-blooded, true Republican in the wake of Barry Goldwater's nomination. Whatever one's political leanings, the 37 year age gap melted before one's eyes as Rachel and Bill developed a lively personal chemistry in real time.

Oh, alright, one more political reference. For currency and sheer numbers, the political marriage between pseudo-Democrat Bernie Sanders and his hoards of Millennial followers (soon to be Bern-outs?) is taking its place in the annals of oldster/youngster synergy. There are perhaps many reasons for the attraction of men and women not long out of their teens to a 74-year old revolutionary gadfly. Whatever his strengths (regard for the economic underdog) or limitations (national security anyone?) may be, Sanders is widely viewed as authentic and straightforward, valuable currency in this age of political moral bankruptcy. He 'gets' them, as they do him. It's even possible that he is so inherently rumped, so funkily uncool that he is, well, way cool. If a permanent resident of la-la-land.

I offer none of this, incidentally, as an explicit ode to Millennials, despite having two of their best for sons and several of their young friends among ours, too. Millennials are optimistic, connected, savvy, excellent workers and herald our future, for better or worse. They are also rather self-absorbed and oddly addicted to sleeping in awfully close proximity to their darned cell phones. Not to mention that they are as a generation too heavy. More nachos and mojitos, anyone?)

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My underlying concern is that we dare not fail to take heed of their potential power, along with that of every succeeding generation, to change the world in profound ways for the good of humanity and, for that matter, the planet itself. One of the mightiest tools they have is the ability to work with vision, joy, and certitude with those of us having far more miles on us . . . or somewhat fewer. In a world sometimes seemingly dominated by differences and anguish, it's reassuring to reflect on how "plays well with others" should be on all of our report cards, not just those of us passing through kindergarten.

Make that flying.