

The Aging Academic
Where Did I Put My 'Foucault'?

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There's much to remember when aging comes to the professoriate

By LENNARD J. DAVIS

This morning I ran 20 miles in preparation for a marathon. This will be my 15th marathon since I started running in my 30s, and I'm still loping along in my late 50s. My best time was close to three hours, which I set in my younger days, but now I'm expecting to do something closer to four. In fact, a Web site that predicts finishing times based on past performance showed me finishing this year in three hours, 48 minutes — exactly my time when I ran last year.

It's expected that athletes will slowly decline in ability as they age. Every athlete accepts that. But not every professor does. It seems more or less forbidden to talk about what happens to academics as they age. There is virtual silence about the kind of age-associated changes that affect teaching, learning, and research. Baby boomers, known for their willingness to talk about everything having to do with themselves, have been open on issues from breast cancer to erectile dysfunction, empty-nest syndrome, and depression — but in academe, no one dares utter the word "old." Is this because we think that the intellect is ageless, and in an era of Botox and Viagra, there should be no excuse for the vagaries of time? Or are we just worried about keeping our jobs?

But my age cohort faces definite challenges that need talking about. I've asked around a bit, and here are some of the issues that have come up.

The biggest is memory. Everyone over 50 knows about age-associated memory loss. That loss tends to be in specific areas, although studies have shown that overall memory doesn't necessarily deteriorate with age. The loss that affects academics most is the dreaded unavailability of proper names.

I used to pride myself on my ability to produce instantly the author and title of a book, and even the publisher and date of publication. That's an invaluable skill in lectures, advising sessions, and symposia. Now I find that it takes me a little longer — well, sometimes a lot longer — to recall the name of a book or an author, and you can forget about the publisher and date. I've developed stalling tactics to deal with the memory hiccup, allowing the gremlins in my brain time to riffle through the cerebral archive. I've even suggested to students and colleagues that instead of causing them annoying moments waiting around for me to retrieve information, I will simply say "proper name" as a place holder. You know, when you talk about that book by Proper Name published by Proper Name Press, and made into the movie starring Proper Name?

Then of course there is the absence of short-term memory in recalling recent events. In real life, that translates into the senior moment of going into another room to get something, only to stand

in confusion trying to remember what that thing was. In academic life, it becomes an occasion to repeat a piece of information to a class, having forgotten whether one mentioned it in a previous session. It's easy to work around that kind of memory loss by asking students, "Did we discuss this point?" However, if you ask the question too often, you risk being considered doddering.

Perhaps a bit more disturbing was the experience of a colleague who read an article on ancient Greek drama with great excitement, took extensive notes, and determined to use the material in an article — only to discover when going through previous notes that he had read the entire article the year before and had already taken extensive notes.

Then there is the zeitgeist issue — you no longer live in the same world as your students do. You refer to things that seem to have happened fairly recently — John F. Kennedy's assassination, the Beatles, TV shows like *The Honeymooners* and *Leave It to Beaver* (or you just use "Eddie Haskell" as a shortcut for a "toady," itself a word no longer used) — only to realize that your students not only don't understand these casual references but weren't even born when these things were around. Maybe, in an effort to be "hip," you start mining your children and grandchildren for current phrases. If you're lucky, you can pull this off, but more likely you'll get it wrong and think "hipsters" are the same as "hippies," or that "emo" is a character on *Sesame Street*. Handled badly, this attempt to be in the know can make you look like your elderly Aunt Selma doing the twist at some family affair (although your students probably don't even know what the twist is).

That brings up the issue of hipness in general. When I began teaching, I wanted to be the hip, cool professor who, like some of the professors I had had, seemed to have just arrived from some great party or literary event. I had an art-history professor when I was an undergraduate who showed up at a 9 a.m. class wearing a Persian-lamb trench coat and a Humphrey Bogart hat. He always looked as if he had stayed up all night, and he smelled of cigarette smoke, perfume, and booze. A few years later, he was a resident of a nursing home in the neighborhood of the university, sitting outside on sunny days and looking smaller and thinner than he had in class — certainly without his panache. As I get older, I wonder if my panache is leaving me, and if my sartorial statements are embarrassing me without my knowing it. (Does a student think, when she looks at my corduroy blazer, "He is so 90s"?)

Worse, everyone of a certain age worries that they've run out of ideas. When I was a young professor, back in the late 70s, I attended a lecture by the French structuralist critic Roland Barthes. In his 60s at the time, during a talk unashamedly called "Proust et moi," he wondered aloud where his own career was going and said that most people had only one good idea in their lives, two if they were lucky. It never occurred to me before that moment that people like Barthes were anything but endlessly creative. Now in my 50s, I wonder the same thing. I've been lucky enough to find and be excited by a series of new interests and ideas, having moved from the theory of the novel to disability studies to biocultures in a way that has felt continuous and yet fresh. But what if I am just dressing up some central insight in different disguises, reconstructing it for each of my books?

For many academics, the so-called golden years can be leaden days spent shuffling around old ideas and notes, feeling the depression of sameness and routine mounting and pointing like the

exterminating angel toward the exit door of retirement. Add to that problems like difficulty in focusing one's attention and declining sight and hearing, and you've got some serious challenges to teaching and research.

That exit door does start to loom larger and larger in one's consciousness as one ages. In Europe there are mandatory retirement ages, but not in the United States. We can teach till we or our students drop — but should we? How will I know when it's time for me to quit? I know one professor in his 90s who still teaches a course or two a year and edits a journal. But for every one of him, there are a lot of other folks who cut back on hours spent on research and class preparation, relying on their yellowed notecards, and increase their time at the golf course or gym.

Being an aging academic has a definite upside, though. You know more; you've read more; you've seen intellectual fads come and go. "Ripeness is all," King Lear said, and that ripeness gives flavor and color to our work and our teaching. We may not be young, hip professors anymore, but Academic Central Casting has plenty of room for the wise woman and the knowing don. A lifetime of experience, reading, and writing is a valuable resource. When I turned 50, I decided that it was time to start giving back, and I made a commitment to be a mentor to junior faculty members and graduate students. Perhaps we can take advantage of the physical and mental aspects of aging by using them to benefit others.

Still, it's not so easy to dismiss the cares of older age with a quick bit of folksy wisdom or inspiring thoughts at the end of an essay. Age is for real, and so is death. Even if age and death don't get you just now, simply being of a certain age will. I'm hearing more and more scholars, especially women, say that they aren't revealing how old they are anymore. Although we all abhor age discrimination, it is one form of prejudice that flies low on the outrage radar. You might look great, run marathons, even use Botox, but you could still be the victim of discrimination. So while personal self-help is useful, it's even more important for our institutions to take special care that fairness and justice apply to everyone in academe — especially those who have served it throughout a lifetime.

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