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Insufficient charge

Whenever I view life as a journey, being in one's 30s seems like nearing the halfway mark. The implications of this realization run quite deep. My younger fellow passengers have ample time to gaze aimlessly outside their windows and take in the moving images unfolding in front of their eyes. I take a moment to reflect on their luxury with a mix of admiration and envy, till the ticking clock is impossible to ignore. This trip is likely to end before I know it and the possibility of detraining with the dissatisfaction of unmet goals seems ominous.

My 20s seemed to be the time of soul-searching, while my 30s have brought about a sense of self-awareness and assertiveness — I still may not know what I want, but I sure know what I do not. The lines in the Glenn Campbell classic ("*...so take the photographs and still frames in your mind; hang it on a shelf in good health and good time.*") or Kidrock song ("*...sipping whiskey out the bottle, not thinking 'bout tomorrow; singing Sweet home Alabama all summer long ...*") elicit an upswell of memories. Even the mundane events in my daily life bring profound realizations. For example, the outpour of birthday wishes triggers a sinking feeling of getting older by the second, noticing that the players in my favorite cricket team are suddenly a lot younger than I, or that I have forever lost the chance to feature on any 30 under 30 lists.

This time becomes a lot about donning the many hats of sustaining a fulfilling career, nurturing social relationships, making sound financial decisions, planning for the future, and if one is lucky, leaving a legacy of a body of work. As Robert Frost put it: "*...two roads diverged in a yellow wood, And sorry I could not travel both...*", this age ushers the knowledge that every time one chooses a path, he implicitly says no to the opportunity to explore another. Frost admits that the road he took turned out to be the right one ("*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I — I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.*"). Here, I delve into how the reality of a 30-something person is shaped by his combined awareness of creativity, mortality, and responsibility. How often does one fear becoming the less-fortunate traveler led astray by the wrong choice of path and, unlike Frost, is denied the opportunity to pen down his journey?

One: Creativity

Readers may differ on the very definition of creativity. Let us say it refers to the ability to build upon or find associations among seemingly unrelated concepts, spawning a novel way of thinking within a well-studied field, or better, birthing a new field altogether. Whether age and creativity are connected remains a subject of passionate argument and counter-argument among psychologists. Human behavioral research suggests that the creative mind functions in two ways: *deliberate* and *spontaneous*. Deliberate thoughts are structured and aligned with a person's beliefs, whereas spontaneous thoughts are often outrageous manifestations of the unconscious. Irrespective of the mechanism employed by the brain, the prefrontal cortex is responsible for processing the germ of the idea into a

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workable solution. It follows that the prefrontal cortex losing its cognitive flexibility or “nimbleness” with age implies that those workable creative ideas will be hard to come by. It is common knowledge that Newton, Darwin, and Einstein reached the peak of their creativity by their mid-20s. That is likely because the deliberate thought process becomes the default mode of operation with age, making groundbreaking thoughts progressively scarce.

An effort to quantify this observation led to the analysis of age versus creativity of 493 Nobel recipients between 1901 and 2003. The biological age of these men and women who conceived their paradigm-altering, ingenious ideas was reported as 34.39 ± 7.43 (mean age \pm standard deviation from the mean age). Further, few scientists, such as Bardeen, Sanger, and Curie, were able to achieve this Nobel-winning feat more than once. While it is unfair to suppose that the others ceased to be brilliant in the later years, the disturbing evidence suggests that none of the ideas borne out of their mature and deliberate modes were subsequently deemed adequately revolutionary by the scientific community (Dietrich, et al., 2007). Creativity seems to be a bell-shaped curve that peaks in the 30s. Understandably, a person in his 30s is aware of the ticking clock and the need to make each moment count. Add to that the likelihood of a cognitive decline brought about by age-related changes to the brain, suspending memory, logical thinking, processing of ideas, executive functions, etc., but most notably the prowess of creative expression (Drago, et al., 2006). Not to mention that the prevalence of early-onset dementia threatens to further limit the active years of one’s life. This fear of creative insufficiency feels almost like standing on the brink of the prime of one’s creative powers. It would be unfortunate if the question — who am I? — asked by a person in his 30s and 40s is no longer a philosophical or rhetorical inquiry, but a literal and clinical one. The inevitable decline is best captured in my favorite poem ‘Ulysses’:

“...Tho’ much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are,—
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

While I have quoted the above lines in several debates and essays over the years, I must admit that one needs life experiences and perspective to appreciate its rare evocative quality. It conveys the self-doubt of a once indomitable, seafaring adventurer and Greek hero, Ulysses. The man shudders at the possibility that he could be rendered invalid by time and fate, as he invites his fellow explorers to put their vitality and mettle to the ultimate test by following ‘knowledge like a sinking star’.

Perhaps all is not lost — let me point to the two beacons, namely, *human will* and *optimism*, at the end of this tunnel of gradual creative decline. Alongside world-renowned names such as Picasso, Tolstoy, and Verdi,

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who were prolific well into their advanced age, I grew up reading about two individuals from my part of the world who remained productive till the very end. Rabindranath Tagore, the great Indian Nobel-winning litterateur has penned over 3,000 songs, poems, plays, short stories, and novels. In a career spanning close to 60 years, he even experimented with research on Ayurveda and was an accomplished musician. The other great was the father of the Indian nation Mohandas Gandhi, whose political activism continued literally till the day of his assassination. Much like Tagore and Gandhi, the man who penned the very poignant lines I cited earlier, Lord Alfred Tennyson, lived and created well into his 80s. I tend to remind myself of the instances of ordinary men and women doing extraordinary things by sheer dint of what Friedrich Nietzsche termed will to power (*“Wille zur Macht”*) — the ability to leverage willpower to disregard the restrictions of societal norms and embrace one’s individuality as a way of authentic creative expression. Thus, in the face of adversity, there is little doubt that the human mind is truly capable of creating in unthinkable ways. How else could Van Gogh produce his masterpiece *“The Starry Night”* in the nadir of his mental struggles from a small studio at Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, France, or artists with Alzheimer’s disease and associated progressive cognitive impairment retain their creative instincts till the very end (Fornazzari, 2005)? Often a person tends to leverage his adversity — coming in the form of age, physical and cognitive decline, angst, mental block, or sociopolitical unrest — as the crucible of new ideas. Creativity often finds its way of expression as it did for one master composer who started to turn deaf in his 20s and was completely bereft of hearing by his mid-40s but poured all his ingenuity into timeless symphonies. I tell myself that one way of combatting my fears of creative insufficiency is to take inspiration from these real stories and make timely adoption of self-discipline, healthy lifestyle habits, and delayed gratification from self-destructive impulses.

Two: Mortality

I begin this chapter with the mention of a theory in social and evolutionary psychology, termed *terror management theory* (TMT). Let us begin with the admission that when you hear this coinage for the first time, you guess that this concept could very well be a brainchild of Stephen King, Edgar Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, or men of their ilk. In reality, Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski (Solomon, et al., 2015) proposed TMT to explain the adoption of cultural and religious values as a means of overcoming the anxiety of mortality. The other change induced by the comprehension of the insufficiency in remaining lifespan — one more germane to this discussion — is *mortality salience* (MS): a person’s growing awareness of the inevitability of death tends to prime him for healthy practices in a desperate attempt at self-preservation (Bevan, et al., 2014). Unsurprisingly, any sign of deteriorating health triggers his consciousness of the inescapable decay and the primordial fears of perishing. As a man in his 30s, I find myself at somewhat of a cusp, as deep down I helplessly clutch at the straw of my evanescent salad days and steel myself against the onset of an endless saga of hospital visits, broken bones, restricted mobility, morbidity, or potentially much worse.

In the Bhagavad Gita — the holy Hindu scripture — Prince Arjun is as-

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sured by his counsel and God, Krishna, that both a God and a mortal have many lives. This reference elicits very little comfort in a 30-plus-year-old god-loving Hindu mortal, grappling with a keen awareness of the passage of time and a premonition of the inevitable End. The reason for such discomfort is underscored in Krishna's next lines: a mortal is predestined to forget his many births (*"You have forgotten them, while I remember them all"*). In light of recent events, you cannot fault that mortal in his 30s for being pessimistic about many lives or the future of his present one, as he has lived through the unprecedented public health crisis from 2020 onwards. On a personal note, I remember that I had just turned 30 that year and moved to a new city to embark on the next steps in my academic career. Unfortunately, the heartbreaking fact that my beginnings coincided with the ends of many lives worldwide was reminiscent of the ageless lines by T.S. Eliot I retained in memory since my school days. The lines quoted below tell the story of the wise men journeying to witness Christ's birth and are both enlightened and disillusioned. The arrival of Christ signifies a new beginning, but it marks the end of an era of age-old and deeply held beliefs.

"...were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, ..."

Many may recall from early 2021 that the world media was rife with news of the elderly being granted a lower priority regarding the right to vaccination as well as hospital admission in several countries (Lloyd-Sherlock, et al., 2022). Two schools of thought surfaced in the mainstream of public consciousness. One was based on the idea of fairness, whereby those who lived a full life should be content being on a low-priority list, and the other stated that age notwithstanding, resource allocation must be built on equality in the right to live. Amidst this chaos, the 30-something-year-old like me was neither too young to ignore the implications of such policies nor too old to surrender his chances to fate. I inadvertently found myself in the perfect place and time to know that the unstated rule of the old being expendable is unlikely to go away in his lifetime. This institutionalized bias, often brusquely or perhaps realistically explained away by declaring that the clinical outcome is far poorer when the person is aged or stricken with comorbidities, only reinforces the MS I touched upon earlier. Again, not to say MS cannot have any positive effect on the psyche of a tricenarian. There is empirical and experimental evidence to suggest that a premonition of this impending crisis sensitizes a young person about his highest priorities and promotes a deep sense of community, detachment from materialism, and unselfish behavior.

Three: Responsibility

Many will remember an episode from the sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory* (TBBT), where the neurobiologist Amy devises a social experiment to employ subliminal messaging to spark her physicist husband's interest in kids. Their friend, Raj, sees through her ploy and calls Amy out, playfully suggesting that getting her husband to like kids may not be easy. To this, Amy takes up the challenge with a short retort ("*I slept with him, I married him ... you want to bet against me?*"). Her conviction and manipulation tactic unsurprisingly pays off as her husband Sheldon confides in Amy at the end of the episode that he sees himself siring 'either five sets of triplets or three sets of quintuplets'. Often the tricenarians find themselves in Sheldon's shoes as their spouses or society gladly takes the place of Amy. The advice to start a family before it is too late is woven into our universal biological or evolutionary urge to procreate. I am aware that I had to expend many words and a reference to my favorite television show to convey a sense of this peer pressure, while the gen alpha, beta, and beyond will effortlessly summarize it via spiffy hashtags: fear/joy of missing out (#FOMO, #JOMO).

For unmarried 30-something-year-olds, the social discourse typically revolves around missing out on the greatest widely accepted pleasures of life. Specifically for a woman that age, the conversation saunters into uncomfortable spaces of ticking biological clock and potential maternal complications. For the married ones, it is usually about actuating what is considered the real purpose of finding the all-important mate — starting a family. Any rebellion on the individual's part is generally of little consequence in the long run. Remember that it is revealed at the end of the TBBT and its spinoff, that even the implacable Sheldon eventually becomes a father. In my experience, these persuasions are generally harmless and the insistence comes from a place of concern. Indeed, one needs a partner to tide over the emotional ups and downs due to the creative and lifetime insufficiency I covered in my earlier chapters, as well as other deeper and complex issues life presents along the way. At the same time, it is imperative to acknowledge that the support we derive from these relationships comes at a price — responsibility — which the person in his 30s fears and one that lies at the very core of his staunch reluctance to commit.

I often come across lifestyle blogs on the effects of peer pressure on the minds of teenagers and young adults. A study on social psychology suggests that this sense of social responsibility tends to vary greatly even within same-age intervals (Schaie, 1959). It is comforting to think that not all men and women in their 30s are equally troubled by an annoying and relentless voice in their heads reminding them of their obligations and unlike me may enjoy an unencumbered existence now and then. Furthermore, Schaie's study reported that particularly during midlife, responsibility seems to be modestly correlated with length of education as well as intelligence. The reasons behind this association are not hard to imagine: higher education and intelligence imbue an individual with commensurate awareness of complex social issues as well as the urge to make informed decisions on his responsibility as a social being.

An important cog in the responsibility saga is digital media and its unmatched ability to heighten the sense of insufficiency in fulfilling responsibility. I have watched from fairly close quarters the lives of people my age get remote-controlled by the endless glossy spectacles of personal achievements, relationships, extravagant vacation photographs, and material possessions of mere acquaintances. Men or women in their 30s skimming through the curated reality on display via their social media page are inadvertently shoved into a trip of searing self-analysis: am I nurturing the relationships in my life; am I falling behind others concerning life goals; or am I investing in the right equity? While I feel blessed that my social media time is embarrassingly low, this emotional crisis will continue to worsen as we devolve into immersive, augmented virtual reality as prognosticated by Neil Stephenson in his 1992 science-fiction novel, 'Snow Crash'. The ones that preserve their self-identity have a fair shot at surviving the salvo of dos and don'ts fired by their physical and make-believe communities.

Seated in a coffee shop, I was penning down the concluding lines of this article. I could overhear an elderly couple discussing Medicare as they added up the calories in each nibble of a shared cheese sandwich, while a 5-year-old at another table bathed in chocolate cream dripping out of his sumptuous-looking donut. Occupying a table between the two distant epochs in human history, I was nervously counting the minutes before the old gentleman while wobbling back on his feet tumbled on my table or the residual chocolate-laden donut got flung out of those small, exuberant hands at my laptop, which anyway seemed to be fast running out of charge. I decided to make a move before it died.

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