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### ESSAYS

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#### **Growing older, or what else I learned in graduate school**

*Robert Epstein*

My son Julian is now tall enough to climb up onto the toilet seat and from there to the sink, from which he can easily open our medicine chest. When I saw him recently with a Bic shaver in his mouth, I was moved to clean the chest out.

I came across more than a dozen empty or half-empty drug containers: Cafegot, Benadryl, Valium, Prednesone, and so on. I was struck by the fact that before I came to graduate school, about the only drug I had ever taken was aspirin. I never even drank tea or coffee.

I got to thinking. Had graduate school turned me into an addict? My first, rather emotional response was yes. Four years of studying to the point of eyestrain, hastily preparing lectures,

writing and rewriting papers, and conducting unceasing and often tedious research—in a word, an eighty-hour work week with little relaxation—takes a toll. A lack of exercise and a poor diet probably didn't help.

Most of the graduate students I know well are in no better shape. Of the sixteen that entered my department in 1977, only ten remained by the end of the first year. Two of those who left were males with long hair and ideals; they saw no point to the politics and pressures. One set out on an ambitious business venture, which failed. Another, who, I'm told, had Boards scores of 800, is now a bum. He walks the streets of Boston carrying a large plastic bag in which are all his worldly goods. He was plump in 1977; he is now emaciated. The students that stayed have their share of woes, too. An associate has put on twenty or thirty pounds and walks with shoulders slumped. A close friend attributed his failure on an important exam to his dependence on a tranquilizer. An ulcer is practically a medal of honor; you've "made it" if you've got an ulcer.

But then I reconsidered. After all, I am a scientist (albeit just a social one). Could I be certain that graduate school was the culprit? The answer, of course, is no. My medicine chest would probably have looked the same no matter what I had been doing these past four years. I might have developed different allergies had I been pumping gas, but I probably would still have some. I would certainly have been subject to stress had I been working for an insurance company or bank. My friends outside of academe are in no better shape than the ones inside.

The villain is not graduate school, it's growing up—or perhaps I should say, growing older. Several changes occur as you move through your twenties and

into your thirties. First of all, your environment becomes more demanding: your parents' financial support drops off to a trickle and finally dies. You start needing money for necessities and not just a better turntable. You accumulate "responsibilities"—in my case, school debts, a wife, and children; for some of my friends, a house to work for (and be worked by). And your work load grows in proportion to your ambition.

Second, your body starts to deteriorate. I apologize for speaking so plainly about such a sensitive topic—especially to those of you under age 25—but it can't be helped. Sometime in our twenties we all experience the first signs of physical aging. We get allergies (I can no longer eat peanut butter, which I happen to love); we start losing noticeable amounts of hair; we get wrinkles, flabby stomachs, bad breath, hemorrhoids, and worse. We lose a bit of stamina. I got through college "pulling all-nighters"; I couldn't pull one now to save my life. We can't run as fast or jump as high. Reaction time slows. Vision and hearing start to go. We become susceptible to insidious diseases we never heard of as children (my wife, for example, has "periodontitis," and I have "chondromalacia" of the knees).

Third, you can no longer think as well. Some psychologists will dispute this, but we all know it's true. A junior faculty member remarked that he could no longer solve the puzzlers in *Scientific American*. When I was fourteen I could routinely think ten moves ahead in three-dimensional tic-tac-toe. I've lost nearly half a move a year.

And fourth—perhaps as a result of the other changes—we lose ideals. I find this the most painful change, probably because I've been struggling so hard for the past few months to hold on to mine. My friend Peter is a striking example. He practically ran our high

school; he was bright, articulate, and likable, and more important, he knew how to work a system. He was a leader and an organizer, he promoted causes, and yet somehow managed to avoid making enemies. His long-term goal was to become a doctor, become president of the A.M.A., and then abolish the organization. If anyone could do it, Peter could. He stuck to his guns in college, and organized a group that sued his medical school in 1976. There was no stopping Peter. Last fall I ran into him at our college homecoming. He was with an attractive woman, sipping a martini, and talking about the \$80,000 home he had just bought. I was distraught. "What happened to your goals," I asked, "to your ideals?" "Guilt," he said. "It was all guilt."

I'm apprehensive about the future, and not just because of the depressed job market. I'm apprehensive about changes—about aging, about growth, about a physical and emotional future that no one ever prepared me for. I don't think anyone even tried to prepare me for the changes that have occurred in my twenties. And I'm embarrassed to say that 35 courses in psychology haven't made much of a difference.

When I was seventeen, a rabbi tried to convince me that there was some sort of afterlife. Try to explain to a fetus, he said, what it's going to be like to live in the world, what the next stage of its life is going to be. The fetus just won't understand. When you die, he said, you are like the fetus, entering into a new realm that you couldn't possibly have anticipated. I think every stage of life is like that. When you are a toddler, you can't envision or understand the confines of a classroom. When you reach your teens, you can't make any sense at all of what your parents are doing. When you are in college—well, let me just say that you've got it pretty good. I can't speak with any authority about the changes to come, though I must say that I am beginning to look at my own parents with a certain sympathy and cautious understanding that were inconceivable four years ago.

In what will seem like a rather short time, my second child, due in a few days, will be finishing college on her (we hope) way to graduate school or a career. I suspect that she will be as ignorant as I was about these matters, and as unprepared. I doubt that anyone will take the time—or have the nerve—to tell her about the aging process that's about to have its way with her, about the changes she is going to have to deal with.

It certainly won't be me.

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## Growing older

Perhaps your readers will be interested in the aftermath of my essay "Growing older, or What else I learned in graduate school" (July-August, page 5).

I have received comments now from nearly fifty people, almost all of them sympathetic. Apparently I am not the only one who has had such revelations. One professor here, in his late forties, I'd say, wrote, "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but it only gets worse." A junior faculty member, not nearly as decrepit, made a similar remark and swore he'd write a sequel. A Harvard junior told me that her parents made copies of the piece for all their children, "to prepare us." (She found it depressing.) And a graduate student at a university in the Midwest, concerned about

the fact that she doesn't look as good as she did during her Harvard days, distributed copies to most of the people in her department. My mother's only comment was, "I'm just sorry you had to learn about such things so early."

Some, like the Peter Pans whose letters you published in September, dissented, but it is my impression that very few people actually feel comfortable about growing older. (Could it be simply that the nervous systems of those fortunate few are deteriorating more rapidly than the rest of their bodies?)

Finally, the life-insurance salesmen are now after me. And I take it as a bad omen that I have been put on the mailing list for advertising about 50 Plus magazine, "for the fastest growing generation." The last circular I received had the words LAST CHANCE emblazoned in red at the top.

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