

When a man gets older, he starts to moulder.

In one of his poems, Tadeusz Boy-Zelenski wrote this about old age;

Gdy sie czlowiek robi starszy
Wszystko w nim po trochu parszy-
wieje.

When people age they go to rot,
everything bit by bit starts rott-
Ing.

Ceni sobie spokój miły
I czeka az całkiem wyły-
sieje.

They think themselves so nice to know
but all the time their hair is go-
Ing.

I have always liked this verse form in which the last word in the first line rhymes only with a part of the second line and the end of that divided line is placed on its own in the third line, rhyming with another part of the word in the third line of the next verse. But what I admire is not just the literary form the author uses but also the profound truth about old age contained in those two expressions, everything and bit by bit.

Everything means that the process of ageing is not only something we observe as we contemplate our faces in the mirror and what our so-called friends have noticed long before we do, but also the process of deterioration we feel inside our own bodies of our mental and physical faculties which we do not become aware of until they begin to cause serious disorders.

Little by little I understand to mean that old age does not arrive suddenly but creeps up on us. Besides, individuals age differently, some sooner, some later, some more rapidly, some more slowly and still others more or less visibly. In the end, old age cannot be cheated. These different ways in how we age is why our chronological age cannot be a reliable guide to ageing. Therefore the notion of biological age has been introduced based on more objective criteria – laboratory research, and various other tests. Unfortunately this opens the way to shameless abuse. We frequently encounter people, often in responsible positions who, having reached the age limit of their particular profession, still wish to continue working and demand a doctor's opinion that they are biologically younger and therefore capable of continuing to work. These excessively positive opinions raise suspicions and remind me of the well-known saying that "there is nothing less truthful than a certificate signed by a doctor" which sounds almost Biblical – because that's where it comes from.

"But ye are forgers of lies, ye are all physicians of no value" (Book of Job 13.4) which in Polish is as follows;

"Bo wy zmyslacie oszustwa, lekarze nic niewarci" (Ksiega Hioba 13.4)

In view of the difficulty of deciding whether we are getting older or perhaps not yet, I have devised my own methods to try to solve this dilemma. I shall give some examples from my own life, although I am aware that they do not necessarily show me in a very flattering light.

At the time I was a very young doctor, busy with everyday tasks, often on night duty, in two hospitals and an emergency centre. One day I was invited by a considerably older and highly cultured acquaintance to a reception at his smart house where I had been a few times before and had observed the gathering of Warsaw's cultural elite. After an excellent meal, the guests stood around chatting about various topics when somebody unknown to me came up and asked whether I had seen a new, well-known film being shown in nearly every cinema. I replied that I had although in fact I had not had any time to see it; I lied because I was ashamed to admit to such cultural ignorance.

As we know, a lie will find you out as I was soon to discover. I had scarcely mumbled "yes" than I was surrounded by a group of guests who began to question me in detail about my opinion of the film. It turned out that they were the leading actors in this film. My initial attempts to evade the questions by claiming that it was difficult for me to express an opinion because I did not have the requisite knowledge nor that I was a cinema fan were brushed aside. The director of the film abruptly interrupted me, saying that they were heartily sick of experts. Film critics, he added, were pathologically jealous of the success of artists, lack objectivity and are mostly clueless. Everything stems from their complexes; they have never created anything at all although they would love to. They are simply incapable. They lead parasitic lives, living off malicious criticism or the success of others. We artists ignore them. We don't make films for them but for the public and that's why I am asking your opinion as a member of the general public.

What could I say? I had to keep lying. Only my youthful impudence allowed me to extricate myself more or less successfully.

"When we read a story, we usually create a clear visual image in our heads, especially when we are young, because children have a greater ability to imagine than adults. We retain these images almost to the end of our lives. If we see a film many years later based on this story, then we compare it with those images we preserved in our memory. If the film looks different, then we are disappointed and react negatively. In the case of the film mentioned above, I can say it totally corresponded to my childhood memory of it. Everything I had imagined when I read the book as a child, I now saw again on the screen. Perhaps that is why I liked the film so much because it lived up to my expectations." With these words my lies were crowned with success. My listeners thanked me for my valuable judgements, their eyes moist with tears of gratitude.

As I learned much later, it was the lady of the house who landed me in this trouble because it was she who invited her friends from the film world, insisting “You must come because Leszek will be there and will tell you what he thinks about your film”

And who is this Leszek? asked one of them. “Oh, he’s a young doctor, a surgeon, very intelligent and always takes a lively interest in cultural matters and never misses a theatrical or film opening night or any interesting book and always has original thoughts about them.” Everything that happened then, namely the lady’s exaggerated opinions of me and all my successful lies, was only possible because I was young. As my shameful behaviour proved, a young person can prattle all sorts of nonsense and everybody will pay great attention. And if this person is not only young but also happens to be a beautiful girl and can talk off the top of her head, then the majority of listeners (especially men) will listen with bated breath and genuine admiration of her “intellect”.

But now try to do this when you are old. You may now have more knowledge and experience and more interesting things to say but you will be ignored. I presume that you are not an old bore, don’t go off at a tangent or tell the same stories and jokes again and again. Now try my test which I created to find out whether you are old or, at least, not yet.

The test is in three parts.

Firstly, think carefully how often you have been invited to receptions or meetings with friends compared with a few years previously. Perhaps you have been invited only because they have to invite you for a special occasion, such as an animal welfare week or similar

If this is so, then there is a suspicion that you are getting old, but only a suspicion. There may be other reasons for your diminishing popularity. Maybe your friends are less well off and cannot afford to throw as many parties as in the past. And maybe you have stopped inviting people so they are returning the compliment.

The second test. If you are invited to somebody’s house for dinner, notice where they place you at the table.

If you are placed in the so-called Seat of Honour where you have a little more space than other guests and a special armchair with elbow rests, then it is very possible that your hosts has your comfort at heart and wish to show you some respect. But there is also the possibility, about half the time, that you are getting old. Your Seat of Honour is in fact the place reserved for the old codger for whom it is necessary to provide more space at table so that when moving your arms you don’t knock your neighbour’s glass over and the elbow rests are not for your comfort but to stop you falling out of your chair if you suddenly drop off to sleep during an interesting conversation. All this doesn’t mean that you have to fall out of your chair to deserve this treatment.

It is enough that your host anticipated such a possibility by observing your appearance and behaviour and came to the conclusion that you are just getting old.

The third and most decisive test is not always easy to carry out. But if the guests linger at the table, as is the Polish custom, then you will certainly have the opportunity to hold forth on any matter or say something interesting. But beware – the defining moment! If the lady of the house interrupts you for a moment to ask her other guests whether they would like some more mushroom sauce or cranberry jelly and then, after this short pause, nobody asks you to continue your story, then that is proof positive that you are already old. Nobody likes to listen to old people. There's nothing we can do about it so we just have to accept it. But if you find it difficult to accept I have a suggestion. Start writing! If any of your readers – and I am optimistic that there may be some – break off their reading to make, say, a cup of tea and then don't go back to finish it, well, you would be none the wiser, would you?