

# The Wonder Years



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I'm in my mid-80s now. I've been in classier places, but considering I've got 45 percent of my original hair, all my teeth except my third molars and I'm still ambulatory, it's not a bad place to be. I don't have to golf, surf, dance or go to the gym three times a week to prove anything. I don't have to wear a tie. I can enjoy the benefits of selective hearing. In my 80s, I can be as eccentric as I want. People expect it. "Isn't your father a little ... uh, strange? I mean, he just called me 'Sparky' and his socks don't match."

"He's, you know, 84, dear, and at that age ..." The eyes roll.

Anybody in his 80s who doesn't take advantage of this period of absolution misses the whole point of being 80. Say anything, do anything short of mayhem and you're home free.

Of course, there's a downside. There's a downside to being 15, 40, 50. It is said that

man alone is born crying, lives complaining and dies disappointed. Oscar Wilde mused, "The tragedy of old age is not that one is old, but that one is not young." Mostly, the trouble with old age is that it comes when we are too old to enjoy it. So, if you are to get your fair share of the Golden Years, your vitals should include besides your blood pressure and ability to instantly identify the songs of 1940, an active curiosity, a robust, if quirky, sense of humor and a continual feeling of wonderment. A dollop of skepticism wouldn't hurt.

If you can still be dumbfounded that anything was ever invented, that pictures and sound can be sent through the air, that the sun comes up every morning and an adult woman could ever remotely consider a permanent union with Ashton Kutcher, it can almost overcome the shock of seeing your children becoming depressingly middle aged.

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In that regard, we have scientists to thank on a daily basis. Here's Fred McGehan. He's the spokesman for the National Institute for Science and Technology in Boulder, Colo. The scientists there are in a tizzy because the Earth is right on schedule in its orbit for the fifth straight year! Right on schedule — how weird is that? Well, in 1972, because the Earth was slowing down in its travels through space, it was necessary to add an extra “leap second” on the last day of the year. This can be a big deal affecting everything from communication, navigation, air traffic control systems and the precise distribution of your medications. But — and here is the part that will keep you too amazed to nap — this slowing suddenly came to a halt in 1999 and the Earth resumed its normal speed. What's up with that? Fred said it could be the tides, weather and changes in the Earth's core. He's guessing. It could as easily be the demise of English in an English-speaking country.

No less exciting is this headline from San Francisco: “SF Researchers Find Drunken Worms Move Slowly.” After six years of work on the project, Dr. Steven McIntire concludes that drunken worms move more slowly and more awkwardly than sober ones. This startling announcement runs contrary to the general public's belief that all worms were drunk and never drew a sober breath.

The science journal *Cell* delineates the whole sordid spectacle, but the gist is this: Thousands of tiny worms were dosed with enough alcohol to render

them unfit to drive in any state of the union. Instead of propulsing themselves in neat little S-shaped configurations like any self-respecting worm would do, the drunk worms bodies were straighter and they tended to lollygag along the way. A couple wanted to challenge a robin to a fight and one was weaving about with a little lampshade on its head.

But here's the thing that makes you glad you're old enough to have the free time to devote to the wonder of it all: some of the worms didn't get sloshed. Those sober worms were found to have a mutated gene that appears to make them immune to alcohol's intoxicating effects. You see where this is going? These particular worms could carouse all night and still qualify for designated driver. Isolate this special bomb-proof gene, figure out how to get it into the human gene system and there goes the market for “a guy goes into a bar ...” type jokes.

If only it were that simple. The main purpose of the gene (called *slo-1*) is to help slow brain transmissions. If the gene is disabled like in the mutant worms, the brain never gets the signal to slow down, the liver eventually turns to the density of Girl Scout cookies and the drinker runs up a tab that gets him tossed out on his ear.

Neurobiology professor Steven Treisman at the University of Massachusetts Medical School gives the worm thing considerable thought, finally concluding, “Humans are a lot more complicated than the worm.” Some are

not, but that's beside the point. In the fight against alcoholism, he agrees, you've got to start somewhere. Slurred speech and loss of inhibition in the average worm are difficult qualities to measure, so the research goes on.

The point is, between bouts at the bingo table and awaiting that 3rd-of-the-month Social Security check, we old people have lots of quality time to wonder what's coming next.

And that, not Metamucil, is what keeps us young. **CDA**