



## GROWING YOUNGER AND PROBABLY WISER

by Betty Sharp



Not every technological advance appeals to me. I won't use a programmable coffee maker because I don't think it has any business knowing when I get up. On the other hand, I'm addicted to my Surface Pro 4, which is easier to carry around than a box of Kleenex. It replaced a 3 pound Thinkpad, which in turn replaced a clunky metal tower that sits in the barn. The cats sun themselves on it. Although I still frequent libraries, my computer allows me to do research at home. I didn't envision this forty years ago, and what I envision for the coming years changes frequently. That's important to younger generations and of course I'm going to tell you why.

It's true that change is occurring faster than most of us comprehend. Few of us can run in place with new product development, let alone outpace it. That's not necessarily bad. I just got my first flat screen TV, for instance, years after friends spent thousands for wall sized screens heavy enough to cause a hernia. I didn't see any benefit to 5' high TV characters in my living room for such money. My quality of life didn't suffer due to old TVs, but I wished for one easily moveable that looked better than Fred Flintstone's. Watching my computer screen didn't suit my purposes. I wanted an inexpensive, lightweight flat TV.

Business and technology finally caught up with me. Last month I paid \$119 for a 32 inch flat screen. I pick it up with one hand, take it outside or to the barn, plug in a \$60 DVD player and enjoy exercising in my yard. I can follow an instructional DVD about massaging my old horse's back, working on him while he stands in front of the screen. (Yes, I think he enjoys watching!). I know my tv has a ROKU box so I could stream but I prefer DVDs. I'm using an affordable product in a way that suits me.

An older person with my attitude is known in academic business circles as

a "lead-user innovator," a consumer who "hacks" a technologically advanced product until it suits her needs. I came across that concept in *The Longevity Economy: Unlocking the World's Fastest-Growing, Most Misunderstood Market* by Joseph F. Coughlin.

This MIT professor argues that baby boomers are going to turn mistaken thinking about the aging population on its head for the benefit of all. Rather than sapping the financial strength of the young, the old are not only the largest new product market but are busily creating new products themselves.

Dr. Coughlin warns, however, that we've been ingrained with the harmful idea of an inevitable "generational storm." We're propagandized to think that we must decrease the financial security of the old to placate the young or we'll be robbing from their future. Well, in a word, that propaganda is poppycock (my word, not his).

Tourism and entertainment industries certainly recognize older people as a strong customer base, so a decline in their financial security and discretionary income spending would hurt those businesses. Further, while it is true that many businesses and entrepreneurs consider older people during product development, it's possible that the overriding image of declining physical and mental abilities is hindering innovation.



Yes, decline comes with age but older people are defining themselves differently than ever before and that's

good for our economy and society and the future of younger generations. In other words, it's not just a better pill sorter that we want to buy or create but to get this across, we need to change the narrative about our aging population.

Let me explain it this way. "Marty" is an excellent 1950's movie about a lonely bachelor who lives with his mother. In a dialogue that has stuck with me for years, Marty's mother is worried that he will marry and move out. "I'm a widow, I'm 55, what's left for me?" That was the perception of old age for decades. Fifty-five was old and the future was bleak. Then, as baby boomers aged and built financial security, ideal retirement was perceived predominantly as leisure time, segregation into age defined communities, lots of golf and RV travel. Old meant the late 60's or early 70's not 55. Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a sea change is occurring. Regardless of economic rise and fall, aging adults are increasingly breaking stereotypes.

Grandmas don't dress like grandmas anymore, jokes about computer ineptitude are fading and many are turning lifelong dreams into reality. That could be anything from buying a first horse, going on a mission trip, or obtaining a university degree.

Second careers through professional training are common now, as are innovative learning opportunities like One Day University. The 70's are "not that old" and the early 80's are "the young 80's."



What does this mean to the younger generations who've been told the aging are a drag on their future? First, it means that you can't put the aging population in a box of just takers anymore. That's exciting for business and could cause explosive economic growth because an aging population that continually adds more years to a vibrant lifestyle expands mar-

kets. The healthier and more financially secure older people are, the more they'll seek experiences that are both fun and meaningful, the more products they'll use, and the more they'll benefit society.

That's happening now and its going to intensify. Aided by everything from Fitbits to service animals and soon by AE (artificial intelligence) in so many ways from help with daily chores to studying languages, it's a sure bet the majority of the aging population isn't going to be sitting around lamenting their plight. They're going to increase volunteering, activism and travel and they're going to add to intellectual growth and overall financial growth in surprising ways. It's not an "old versus young" zero sum game.

Age is not and probably never has been much of a limiting factor in creativity. Circumstances are probably more limiting than age. Our "generational storm" narrative, however, is that a 12 year-old coding whiz is more likely to come up with a world altering idea than an older person. Let me refute that by bringing to your attention Dr. John Goodenough, Professor, Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Texas at Austin. Last year, he filed a patent for a new type of battery. I won't attempt to explain it but if it works, it could end dependence on fossil fuels. Yes, for real, this time. Dr. Goodenough is 95 years old. I know you're scoffing but Dr. Goodenough co-invented the lithium-ion battery in 1980 when he was 57. That's the battery that made possible most of the electronic products you're using right now. When he was 23 in 1946, Dr. Goodenough was told he was too old to be a success in his science field. You can read more in the *New York Times* April 7, 2017 article by Pagan Kennedy titled "To Be a Genius, Think Like a 94-year old." It will open your eyes.

Visualizing life changes through new technology is a creative process in itself. For fun with that concept, read Dan Brown's *Origins*, a futuristic take on AE. Reading it is like watching a B movie thriller in your head. You know you should stop but you can't help yourself. Two cautions: you'll discover why "gaudy" means tacky, and if you're a Fitbit wearer, don't say I didn't warn you.