

# One <sup>very</sup> Old Man

## 80 Is Not 65

Thoughts About Being Very Old

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NOV 05, 2025

Here's a simple fact: 80 is not 65. The older we get the more likely we are to experience chronic illness and declining physical skills, to experience mental decline, and to experience loss of those we care about and who care about us.

Of course, all these things can happen at 65 or even younger. And not everyone who is 80 or even older experiences substantial decline. But chances are if you make it to 80+, you're going to face some tough times.

That's not to say that you can't have a satisfying life when you're very old. I do and so do a lot of other people over 80.

### **But I don't like being over 80.**

I hate that my wife of 48 years is dead.

I am more than a little distressed that my body has betrayed me—

- That I am losing my sight and cannot read books,
- That it is hard for me to hear people—even if I'm wearing my hearing aids,
- That I have had to give up driving because my balance is precarious and I could lose control of the car,

- That I have to walk with a cane to keep from falling,
- That I have to set alarms four times a day so I'll remember to take my medications,
- That my diet is restricted because of diabetes, chronic kidney disease, and gout,
- That I am in constant pain due to deterioration of my spinal cord,
- That my sexual functioning is unpredictable and that I rely on pills for erections.

I am also distressed that my mind is slipping—

- That my memory is increasingly unreliable,
- That I can no longer do math in my head beyond simple addition and subtraction,
- That it is difficult for me to grasp concepts that are new to me,
- That I flounder to figure out technical changes that young people find it necessary to create to “improve” the technology I know how to use.

I am also, it seems, in an unending state of grief. My wife's recent death. The deaths of several close friends just in the past year.

## **I am lonely, not from lack of contact with people but from loss of people I loved.**

I don't like it.

The way I feel about being over 80 is quite different from the way I felt at 65, when I became officially old. Good to have Medicare. Good to have senior discounts. Good to retire at 67 and to no longer work for pay. Good to have Social Security. Wonderful not to have to raise money to support my not-for-profit work. Less stress. Reduced ambition. More time to travel and my avocations, jazz, and photography. Happy to continue to be a social advocate as a

volunteer. I enjoyed teaching more after I retired because I had time to think and to prepare lectures carefully ([Columbia University Lectures on Cognitive and Behavioral Health Policy](#)). It was great fun getting together with former colleagues and swapping war stories of our days in the metaphorical trenches of mental health policy. I enjoyed walking a couple of miles or more a day, especially when we were in Paris. And it was truly wonderful that my wife and I had more time for good sex.

I liked being old. It was consistent with what I had preached for some years before I retired—that you can be old and good.

At that time, I had friends in their 80s who said, “Just you wait, Michael.” My friend Alice, for example, who is now 99 used to say, “The thing about aging is that it’s not good for your health.”

Advanced diabetes, chronic kidney disease, gout, a tumor removed from inside my spinal column, macular degeneration—I now know what she meant.

OK, enough whining. I know I’m one of the very lucky ones. I’m not a super-ager, for sure. But I have a good and fortunate life. Financial security and a nice place to live. A terrific daughter, who is good to me. Excellent grandchildren. Some good long-time friends and some new relationships that I treasure. A new career as a jazz photographer (you can see my work online at [Keystone Korner Baltimore](#)). This blog. Between making new photographic images, playing jazz, writing essays, and hanging out with family and friends, I am—if anything—overly busy.

## **Many other people over 80 also have full and satisfying lives.**

Some are still pursuing their careers, albeit at a more judicious pace. Some have turned to voluntarism and to community and political

life. Some are immersed in their families, especially loving their grandchildren. Some play golf. Some have gone back to school. Some have rediscovered spiritual and creative lives they had no time for when they were younger.

But with only one or two exceptions, everyone I know who is over 80 feels diminished physically and mentally. And most of them have lost people they care about—spouses, partners, close relatives and friends. Grief to a lesser or greater extent is a fundamental part of their lives.

I want younger people who advocate for old people to understand this and to understand that even if you are one of the few lucky people who have the much vaunted combo of positive attitude, exercise, healthy eating, and good sleep, you are more than likely going to face some tough going as you get older and older.

## **80 is not 65.**

No doubt, a lot of us would be better off now if we had taken better care of ourselves. But, come on, there are no pro quarterbacks over 45. There's a senior tour for golfers over 50. The body wear down. If I had taken better care of myself, would I not have developed macular degeneration, grown a tumor in my spine, and lost some hearing? Would I have erections like a teenager? Would my wife not have died from pancreatic cancer?

## **If you live long enough, your body will betray you. It's 100% certain.**

Too bleak? Maybe. I'm not in the best of moods these days. And, as I've said, it's possible to have a satisfying life despite the difficulties that generally come with age. But let's be real. The older you get, the more challenges you will face. 80 just isn't 65.

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