

Decrepitude versus Death

by

Milton Crum, June 2016

The longer I live the more decrepit I will become. At my age of ninety-two, “the ultimate course is a downward one.” Decrepit means “weakened, worn out, impaired, or broken down by old age, illness, or hard use.”¹

In June 2015, I wrote a piece called “Waiting My Turn” (to die) in which I described some of the decrepitude I was facing then.

I wrote that I was “losing ground mentally” and that my brain seemed “confined in a box with little interest in the larger world.” That larger world still seems far-removed from my world in my small room in the assisted living facility in which I live. I sometimes work at dredging up memories of what the town I live looks like: its streets and stores. I have to think about how to do things that I once could have done automatically. But I am doing well editing (researching, writing, expanding, and correcting) Wikipedia articles. I have logged over three thousand edits.

I also wrote that I was “losing ground physically.” I said that my legs were “stiff and they are painful especially in bed.” I also reported that I was “on the verge of using a walker for the 100' walk to the dining area.” There has been a significant increase in decrepitude in the one year since then. I cannot take even one step without a walker or something else to hold onto. I can scoot around in my room because my desk chair has casters. But I could not leave my room without using my walker. The condition of my legs has gradually worsened over the last five years or so. I have observed over the nine years that I have lived in some type of old folks facility many people regress from walking cane, to walker, to scooter or wheelchair. It seems to be one of the prices of longevity.

In “Waiting My Turn,” I also wrote that I was “tired all the time.” I would not now describe it as “all the time,” but I do get tired after at least an eight hours day of Wikipedia editing, handling financial matter, and correspondence. So, I go to bed at 7:00 p.m. with my alarm clock set for 7:00 a.m. I still get, as I wrote a year ago “the intermittent sleep of an old man,” so it is still hard to get up for breakfast.

I also wrote that my digestive system was “out of whack.” It still is. I have had to up my dosage of Miralax to the maximum. It is still true that “whatever I eat turns to gas.” There are some people here who have to have their food blended. There are warnings that constipation, gas, and bloating that I suffer can be caused by colorectal cancer. At one time I would have checked this out with a doctor, but not now.

I still take no medications other than Miralax and I have not seen my doctor since July 2012. One of the things I did to prolong my life was to have moles checked for malignancy twice a year. I know that I have some which from what my doctor told me seem to be Basal cell carcinoma, one on my face. They are a nuisance because they form a scab and grow but they are rarely fatal as is melanoma.

Catch-22 Situation

I do things that I think should slow down the increase in decrepitude. I limit how much I eat to keep my weight under control. I exercise every day: standups from my chair without using my arms, leg lifts holding onto a bar,

full squats holding onto my desk, arm exercises using ten pound barbells.

I think these things help, but it's a Catch-22 situation. They may slow down the increase in decrepitude, but they probably also prolong life. So in the decrepitude versus death battle, the things I have been doing could be giving decrepitude an advantage over death. I don't have any information by which to know.

A Terrifying Experience

In October 2015, I wrote another piece called "Thoughts About 'Waiting My Turn.'" In it I wrote that it was "not only that geriatric literature predicts a downward course" because I saw the worse decrepitude I face if I don't die. I had not seen the worst decrepitude then.

During the last week in May, one of the four houses into which this facility is divided was undergoing repairs and some of its residents had to eat in the house in which I live. What I wrote about the decrepitude I saw in this house was nothing compared to those residents. They seemed to fit Dr. Gillick's description of the "no-man's-land" that often comes before death "in which many people merely exist—unproductive, unvalued, and often unwell, but alive."²

I saw people who had to be spoon-fed. Some could not sit up straight. Many seemed to be only skin and bones. Others seemed to be in an advanced state of dementia. I found it terrifying to see up close the decrepitude that I will endure if death does not win the battle and rescue me.

NOTES

1. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/decrepit>
2. Muriel R. Gillick, *The Denial of Aging* (2007), 3.