

People improve with age morally, but why?

One of the nicer things about growing older is that we grow steadily more pure. It's astonishing how we shed sin and don morality with each passing year.

One night about 50 years ago, for example, I was climbing over a stone wall with my shirt stuffed with grapes, when a stentorian voice bellowed, "Hi! You!" My heart leaped into my mouth, I leaped to the ground, the grapes popped out of my shirt, and I took off like a missile, pursued by outraged roars and heavy boots.

Later, in the sancturay of my bed, did I regret my wickedness, revile myself for shattering one of the commandments and swear that I'd never do it again? Not exactly. What I did was regret losing the grapes, revile myself for being scared half to death, and swear a return visit to the vineyard as soon as the heat was off.

That's what I mean. Today, I'd never consider such a thing. Oh, I might give my golf ball a very small kick if it was in a particularly bad lie in the rough and nobody was looking. I might tell my wife I'd paid the hydro bill in time to get the discount when I knew perfectly well that it was in my pocket, unpaid. But I'd never dream of doing anything dishonest, like stealing grapes from a millionaire with a huge estate and a huge gardener doubling as a night watchman.

Other people are the same. The older they get, the better they get. Not long ago, we visited an old acquaintance, a woman in her early 40s. She had a teenage daughter who was out to dance that night. The kid was to be home by one. As the hour neared, the mother kept break-

Are they covering
their flaming
youth with a
camouflage of grey?

by
Bill
Smiley



ing off her monologue about her church activities, her eyes flitting toward the clock. By one-fifteen, we had to restrain her forcibly from calling the police. The kid showed up at one-thirty. You should have heard her mother. You'd have thought the youngster was utterly depraved.

Later, as mama served tea and vehemently wondered what was going to become of these undisciplined, irresponsible teenagers, I couldn't help casting my mind back. Twenty-five years earlier, our hostess had been a regular young rip, whose specialties were drinking gin out of the bottle in backseats of cars, and going for mixed midnight swims au naturel.

Recently, I spent a weekend with an old college friend. He had distinguished himself at university, not through academic or athletic prowess, but for an incredible memory that could recall the words and tunes of all the bawdy songs ever sung. Saturday night I tried to get a few verses of Riley's Daughter, or Cats

on the Rooftops out of him, but he was strangely reticent. In the old days you had to hold him down and stuff a sock in his mouth to make him stop singing.

Sunday morning, he acted kind of mysterious. Wanted me to go for a walk with him. I decided he was taking me to the bootlegger's, so naturally demurred, buy he insisted. Ten minutes later my mouth was still hanging open as I sat in the back row of the Sunday School and watched my friend, arms waving, face beaming, leading about eighty small types through the strains of Jesus Loves Me.

Last spring I bumped into an old Air Force sidekick in the coffee shop of a city hotel. Hadn't seen him since Brussels, 1945. His name was Dick, but we called him The Count in those days, because he was reputedly, and enviously, living in sin with a beautiful, rich Belgian countess. He was a big, handsome, devil-may-care chap then.

Anyway, we chatted. He was pretty fat, pretty bald, pretty dull. "Remember when we used to call you The Count?", I

asked, in an effort to establish some common ground. He muttered something like, "Count me out", and launched rapidly into a spiel on the work he was doing with juvenile delinquents through a church group. He finally ran out of breath, there was an awkward pause, then: "Guess you haven't met the wife," he said, turning to a large red-faced woman sitting on the stool beside him, eating a vast sundae. It was not the Countess.

And so it goes. You can see them everywhere: people who were once steeped in sin and now pass the collection plate; who were once steeped in gin and whose inflamed noses now light the way for the valiant armies of the temperance movement.

Reformed lechers lead the attack on pornography and prostitution. Reformed poachers want the game laws tightened. Ancient golfers will take off as few as five strokes from their actual score. Sex fiends become saintly.

It's as plain as the wart on your nose that people improve with age, morally, if not physically. But I'd still like to know why.

Is it because they have learned to respect the law and other people's property? Is it because they know the day of judgment is bearing down and they're trying to cover their flaming youth with a nice coat of camouflage grey? Or is it that they simply don't have the stamina to be sinful any more?

Perhaps some of you old sinners could enlighten me.



Damian Nikic



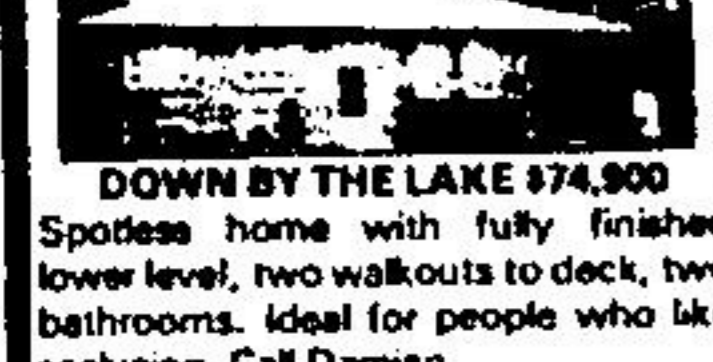
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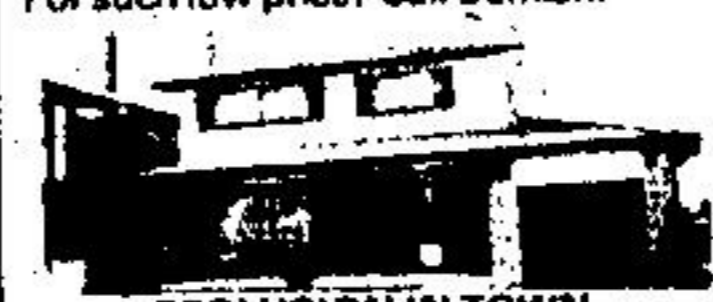
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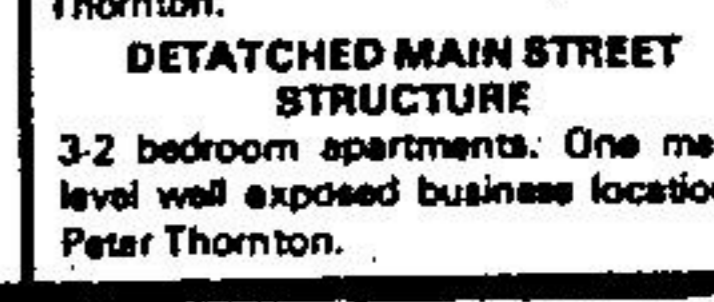
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