

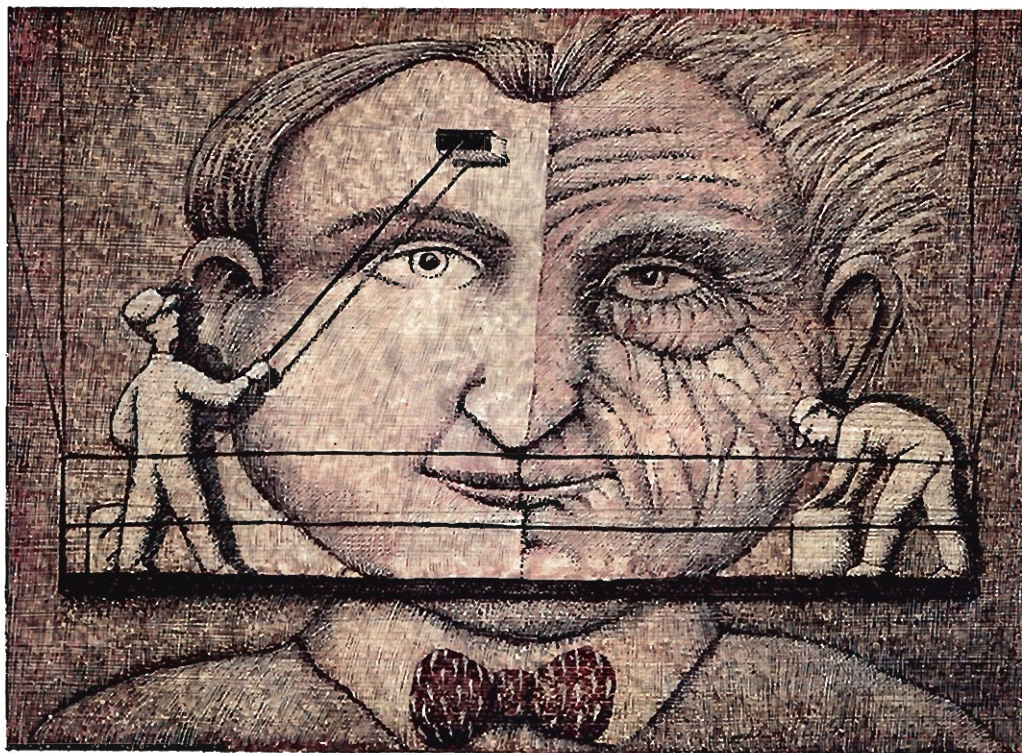
# Mortality

**A**LL OF US, even physicians, are squeamish about discussing mortality, and it is difficult to imagine a desk — of physician or theologian, philosopher or poet — adorned today with the human skull as a reminder of death, as was common among the monks of an earlier era. Instead, we enshrine some memento of our youth, that phase of life we worship. Phony assurances of youthfulness surround us. We are bombarded by media images that are enough to make us hate our own aging bodies and faces and affirm our secret contempt for the old.

The conditions that make the American cult of youth possible do not exist in most of the rest of the world today. Here the fear of death and the fear of aging are one. Only the old die; therefore if one avoids growing old, one will surely avoid dying. In this religion of ours the old cannot exist — they must be some mistake. They prick the bubble of our conviction that enough trips to the health club will keep us young forever. So they are set apart. And they may prefer it that way.

Historically, the power of the elderly has declined as their numbers have mounted. In traditional cultures, most people have been young. High mortality combined with high birth rates produced a bottom-heavy population pyramid; that is, the youngest ages, at the bottom of the pyramid, were overrepresented, while the numbers thinned out toward the older pinnacle. Only a lucky few lived to be old. Today in America, as we frequently hear — because we are living longer, as well as because of our low birth rates — the pyramid has become top-heavy. The portion of our total population that is over 65 has tripled already in this century, and that trend is continuing. In percentages, the fastest-growing age group in the United States at present is people over 100.

There is an old Yiddish blessing: "Til a hundred and twenty." So far, although many have made the blessing, no one has made the goal. From time to time we hear news of a culture — in the Caucasus, in the Andes, in the Himalayas — mountains give rise to these myths — in which reports claim there are people much older than that, routinely, remaining hale and hearty. These claims always evaporate on inspection by competent demographers: there are no birth records, and the claim has relied on an estimate by someone who couldn't count; or the birth record cited is that of a father or grandfather who'd had the same name. The oldest people



PETER SIS

ever really documented — and there are only a handful — were 113 or 114 years old.

And despite our own aging society, with its endless medical miracles, we are not conquering the biological limit, which for most people will remain under a century. Aging is built in. In evolutionary terms, the unavoidable accidents of mortality — getting picked off by wolves or falling rocks or microbes — make it pointless to set the aging clock later than it is; in our original human environments few could make it up there anyway. So the system was left with inherent limits: the Hayflick limit of cell division, for instance, according to which cells can divide at most only about 100 times; or molecular limits — inevitable, accumulating errors in reproduction and repair of DNA, the hereditary machinery that runs all cells.

Transcendence of those limits is not even on the horizon of science. So what we can hope for is not an endlessly lengthening life span, but a prospect that has been likened to "the wonderful one-hoss shay" of the poem, that "ran a hundred years to a day." Without wearing down or faltering, it then simply crumbled: "You see, of course, if you're not a dunce/ How it went to pieces all at once. . . ." Not being dunces (of course) we can see how individual diseases of the elderly could be cured one by one, leaving the body's aging clocks alone to cause total collapse — but only after a ripe and very vital old age.

With important qualifications — the aging clock itself is variable, so one shay collapses at 83, another at 108 — this is exactly what is happening; people are managing more and more often to reach their personal limits. Hence our big population of healthy elderly. Yet these same elderly disengage, seeing how little they are wanted. They retire without a fuss, and devote their sincerest efforts to living well, the best revenge. They lower their golf scores, learn about wine, see the world: "We're spending our children's inheritance," in the words of the bumper sticker.

It is not surprising to find those in between making desperate efforts to stay on the sunny side of this widening gulf. We like to think this is all about health, but knowledge of real health issues shows that most of it is about youth, sex and beauty. None of the health-conscious media have paid much attention, for example, to the interesting fact that our chances of dying are minimized when we are somewhat heavier than the cosmetically ideal weight. And the Duchess of Windsor's dictum, echoed by fashion pundits, that you can't be too thin or too rich, has helped to send hundreds of young anorexic women to ugly, untimely deaths. If health were the main goal, we would hear much less about calories than about diet composition, and still less about the shape of tush and tummy. Even exercise

Despite endless  
medical  
miracles, the  
biological  
limit  
for most of us  
will remain  
under a century.

Melvin Konner teaches anthropology at Emory University and is a co-author, with S. Boyd Eaton and Marjorie Shostak, of "The Paleolithic Prescription."



would take a far back seat to regulation of fat, salt and fiber. And as for our models, they would be reminiscent of Titian's.

The steadily increasing millions we spend on surgery with no purpose except to make us look falsely younger underscore the real intent of all this bodily concern. The expense is great. The risk of general anesthesia is low

but not trivial. Death or brain damage occasionally results. Yet, by the tens of thousands, we — both men and women — cheerfully pay the expense, take the risk, just for a nip and tuck to smooth a wrinkle, or to suck out two or three pounds of fat. Paradoxically, the youthful look supplied by fat reduction works against the smoothness of the skin, so the restless seeker

after youth must often choose between fatness and a nonyouthful wrinkling.

Retin-A is our latest fountain of youth; so far, it seems to be relatively safe and possibly effective in battling wrinkles. No doubt Cleopatra would have killed for it. But the final score on its side effects is not yet in — it won't be for years — and as for effec-

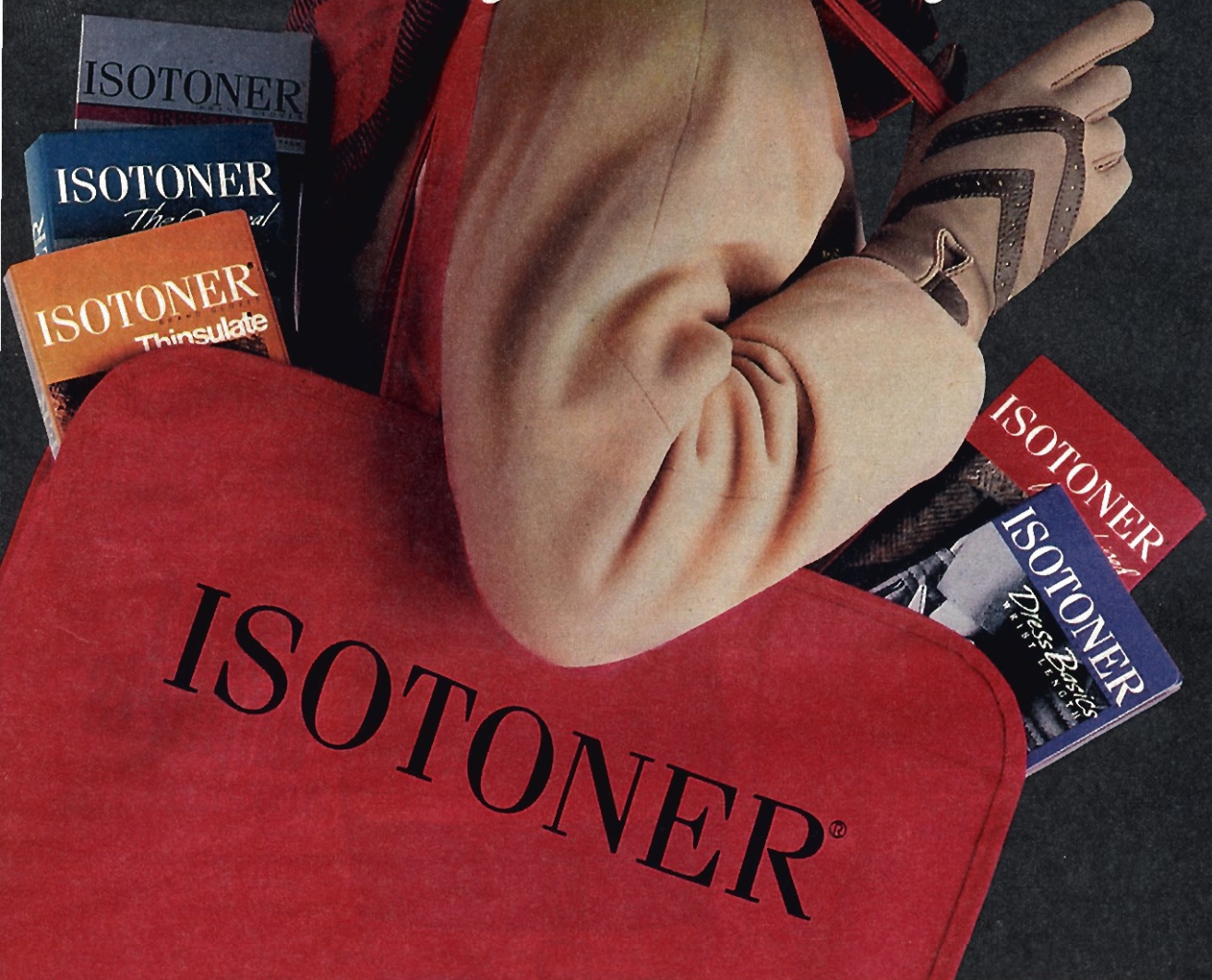
tiveness, there is only one good study. More conventionally, fewer and fewer of us are allowing the natural graying of hair to take its course, preferring instead the cheap and effective pretense of youthful color. Doris Lessing's brilliant account, in "The Summer Before the Dark," of the roller-coaster changes in a middle-aged woman's life depending on whether she does or does not color her hair, says more about our attitude toward aging than volumes of sociology. When gray, in public places, she does not exist.

**T**O AN ANTHROPOLOGIST, this is supreme irony. Among gorillas, the silverback male is top banana, and when that gray streak of fur flashes by, the young — even if equal in size — sit up, take notice, tremble. And in many traditional human groups the postmenopausal woman, free of the burdens of child care, takes the reins of a certain amount of power. Her gray head, her wrinkles and her husky voice cannot be ignored the way a younger woman's youthful appearance might be. As for the Western man who tries to darken his gray hair, a man in most traditional cultures would be baffled. He might as well forfeit a part of his masculinity — or worse, a part of his life.

Camus wrote that men over 40 are responsible for their faces; how ironically we have reinterpreted his saying. He meant that our faces would hold the record of our lives, the sum of 40 or more years of thinking and feeling expressed through the contraction of facial muscles — smiles and frowns that seem, ultimately, almost to reshape the underlying bone. We read his famous remark today and it seems to say to us: You need have wrinkles only if you are too lazy or too poor to get a face-lift.

Our culture does show some signs that go against the trend, signs of increased tolerance toward age. An elderly man has been our President for eight years (although he appears to have few gray hairs) and the predictable jokes have been fairly restrained. Women like Barbara Walters and Margaret Thatcher display the sort of power-building abilities common among women their age in African or Polynesian cultures, but these women are still struggling with cosmetic tricks to conceal what, in a different culture, they could be proud of: the number of years they have lived to gain from experience. Even people in their 70's refer to one another as girls and boys. We have a long way to go — or, more precisely in anthropological terms, a long way to go back — before we can settle gracefully into the wisdom and power of age gracefully enough so that the look of it is something we feel proud of. Meanwhile, it's understandable if most of us knuckle under to cultural pressure — as long as we recognize that ultimately we are that pressure. The exiled culture of aging, and the vain, immature cult of youth will begin to change only when we do. ■

## How to find the perfect gift and carry it off in style.



This beautiful tote bag is our gift to you when you purchase any pair of Isotoner® Gloves.

When it comes to gifts there's really nothing quite like a pair of Isotoner Gloves. They're sleek. They're smart. And they come with Isotoner's unique fabric that hugs the hand for a beautifully snug fit that's almost like a second skin.

Oh, yes. They also come with something else. A free tote bag\*, worth \$12—our gift to you for choosing Isotoner.

Isotoner Gloves. One size fits all...so they're the perfect gift no matter who's on your list.

Looking for just the right gift? With Isotoner, it's in the bag.

\*Offer good while supplies last at participating stores.



**ISOTONER®**  
BRAND GLOVES

Look for Isotoner Gloves—Original, Warm-Lined, Leather Classics and Knit Classics—in the Glove Department of fine department and specialty stores. For a store near you call Toll Free 1-800-544-7590, Monday through Friday, 9:00 am to 5:00 pm EST.

©1988 Aris Isotoner, Inc.