

An AARPer's Life

Americans enter the brave new world of retirement with a lot of silly fantasies. And, says this writer, thank goodness for that.

BY JAMES MORRIS

I'D LOST NO SPOUSE, FAMILY MEMBER, LIMB, OR faculty, suffered no financial reversal, been accused of no crime. I'd merely decided to retire—opted, that is, to appear no longer in the workplace. And the response from friends was a level of concern better suited to a soul in intensive care.

"But what will you do?" Or, more accurately, "But what will you do??!!"

There was nothing chronologically premature about my decision to retire. It wasn't one of those coltish age-55 withdrawals, after which, 55 being the new 35, the retiree decides to start a second family, aspiring to be a PTA president at 72. No, this was a traditional age-65 entry into standard senior citizenry: the potential double-whammy of old age and idleness. My first discount movie ticket (in Florida, at age 55), as fondly remembered as first love, had launched a decade of other such randomly served hors d'oeuvres. Now I was to sit down to the full feast of privileges and entitlements our society prepares for its upper-aged, needy or not: "Full price, my ass! I'm a senior."

But maybe the alarmists knew something I didn't. Retired time, in my conception of it, was to be essentially free time—leisure—which is not the same as time spent doing nothing. Rather, you're free to do whatever you want, so long as you keep your dignity. Your empty hours won't take care of themselves. So I decided to do some proper

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research about what I was getting myself into. And where better to learn the ropes of dignified retirement, I thought, than in the pages of publications I had been sent for years by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), as a perk of membership, but had never quite gotten around to reading?

AARP was founded in 1958 by Ethel Percy Andrus, a retired high school principal with a strong ethic of service to society. Andrus died in 1967, and you can't help but wonder what she would have made of today's AARP, which boasts more than 35 million members (at an annual fee of \$12.50 a pop). Its website says that the organization continues the legacy of Ethel Andrus by sponsoring programs for "tens of thousands of volunteers who help over 2.6 million people annually." But AARP has also become an advocacy and marketing behemoth, with offices in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, and a downtown Washington headquarters that will never be mistaken for a neighborhood senior center, except by aging Medici.

I'm guessing that Andrus heard the acronym for her association, and expected others to hear it, as a conjunction of discrete alphabetical sounds that stood like a quartet of loyal sentries before the group's identity: A-A-R-P. So A-A-R-P it was for many years, with no ambiguity about what any of the letters meant. But once the association reached out to the nonretired too, the letters closed ranks in the late 1990s and came to stand for nothing beyond themselves, like



When surf's up, who cares whether PSA levels are up too?

mercenaries. They were compressed into "aarp," the sound a goldfish might make if it tried to bark.

These days, you're eligible for AARP membership long before you turn in your office ID—at age 50, while you can still use rollerblades, eat spicy food, and fold yourself into a new sexual position. And membership is expected to grow steadily with the recruitment of boomers, who'll stake a birthright claim to a fulfilled old age just as they've staked a claim to fulfillment through each of life's passages since emerging victorious from their first toddler temper tantrum. AARP has to take account of these active types if it's to keep their interest and their dues.

Which made me think that, even if I were to set a retirement course by AARP publications such as the magazine *Modern Maturity*, I might not have to forgo completely the irresponsible fantasy life I'd indulged with other magazines. I might still linger, for example, over the nifty gear in *Men's Journal*: parkas and pup tents, pitons and grappling hooks, vehicles of Her-

culean power, boards for skimming every conceivable surface on Earth, mountain bikes with side-mounted rockets to clear debris from the path ahead. In the pages of *MJ*, individuals scale the sides of tall buildings during their lunch breaks and paraglide into volcanoes. So what if the month's "ultimate workout" pictorial ("Six hours a day to a new you!") turns out a couple of months later to be penultimate at best? You still want to believe the continually updated promise of abs with the texture of a kitchen-counter surface: steel, granite, marble, Corian, and maybe something more (coriander).

"If only I had the time. . . . But one day I will." The thought lent the fantasizing the cachet of research. Take the magazine's periodic features on the most desirable places to live, by nation, hemisphere, planet. Why not relocate to one of these spots after retirement? I marveled at the cliffs and waterfalls, the nine months of snow a year, the whorled, looming waves, the single-mindedness of the morays, the thickness of the rope used to lash yourself and a comrade to a tree in typhoon season. And I thought, "But is there a CVS?"

So *Modern Maturity* it was to be, then, where life, or what

was left of it, would move at a statelier pace. But when I retrieved the latest issue from its place between *Consumer Reports* and a thermal underwear catalog, I found that *Modern Maturity* had gone the way of its ancient and medieval forebears. What I held was *AARP The Magazine*. A little website research revealed that AARP had discontinued publication of *Modern Maturity* in early 2003. I had also missed completely the speed-of-light trajectory of *My Generation* (b. 2001, d. 2003), a magazine for AARP's boomer members. Three years ago, *My Generation* and *Modern Maturity* were folded into the eponymous *AARP The Magazine*, which is now, per its cover, the "world's largest circulation magazine," though the circulation of many of its readers is nowhere near as large as it once was.

In addition to *AARP The Magazine* (hereafter in these pages *AARPTM*), there's a second regular publication, *AARP Bulletin*, not so glossy as *AARPTM*—it looks like Sunday morning's *Parade* supplement without the page 2 celebrity gossip column—but with the same agenda of interests and lifestyle

The best is yet to come? That's a falsehood of governmental proportions, absurd on its smiling face and no more plausible after the smile contracts. But it has become one of the lies we live by. Forget the millions for whom old age is not a boundless commercial opportunity but a relentless financial constraint. The "senior citizens" who have replaced the former "old" in a powerful national myth are curious and adventurous, well-heeled and free—but for the doctors' appointments and hospital stays around which they have to schedule their adventures. They frolic and couple, but carefully, like porcupines, and according to an instruction manual that's more tentative than tantric: "Wait. Not there. No, that doesn't move anymore. Ow!" They've no strings attached, though they may sport an array of other medically mandated paper, plastic, or metal products. It's not the best that's yet to come, it's more of the same, and worse. We haven't lived so long not to know this.

Flipping the pages of *AARPTM*, I learn that I'm to be a consumer still. No slowing down there. Remove the profusion of

cards and inserts from the magazine, and you've a pile that could sustain a bonfire. AARP's a mighty merchandiser, offering, *inter alia*, lapel pins, sweatshirts, ball caps, beach coolers, bumper stickers, office supplies, leisure and travel gear, bookmarks, magnifiers, and a special gas cap that you don't have to remove when filling up. Arthritic fingers don't have to twist the thing, and arthritic minds

don't have to remember where they put it. And there's a portfolio of insurance packages: health, dental, auto, life, long-term care. There's enough variety overall to interest members who may still have an office to go to, those on the move, those slowing down, and those coming to a full stop.

I learn that the new Medicare prescription drug program won't yield up its secrets easily. Having lobbied for the benefit, AARP may feel an obligation to take a shot, or a fusillade, at explaining how it works. The attempt is likely to become a continuing AARP service, lasting long past the lifetimes of great numbers of the drug-dependent old, for the program's intricacies would fluster the steeliest student of Talmud.

I learn that Americans above the age of 55 are now the fastest-growing market segment of the nation's fitness indus-

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advice. Tips for what to do when you pass 50, for example, include: "Wear comfortable clothes." "Buff up your brain." "Sit still." "Jump off a bridge." This last is largely a metaphorical injunction (I think), an attention-getting way of urging you to, say, use the Internet. In any case, you're not to begin with the Brooklyn Bridge, and you're probably to wear a harness.

What did these publications—and visits to the AARP website—have to teach me about how AARPers are to pass their days? Well, at the top of a list of topics on the magazine's website, next to a photo of a 60-year-old female movie star who's been airbrushed to teenage perfection, is "money," above "health." Lesson one, I guess. Unless that honor goes to the larger lesson that's implicit and pervasive, and, at least once, explicit too: "Discover what AARP has to offer. The best is yet to come."

try. We're not talking here about individuals who merely bob up and down in the shallow end of the pool without getting their hair wet. No, these are lifters and toners and the aerobically enhanced. Being a longtime gymgoer myself, with an A for attendance rather than achievement, I'm glad to know that I'll have company through the years of cooldown to come. The gym's a scary place for us seniors to make our way these days, past the yoga studios and Pilates parlors, the beach balls of Busby Berkeley dimensions to which the pliant attach themselves, the cadres of personal trainers reckoning gain and loss on their clipboards with the bloodless precision of recording angels on Judgment Day. The smell of protein powder is in the air, along with the barbaric yelping of instructors urging stationary bikers to "Find it!!! Reach it!!!," as if the stalled spinners were close to a mountain's crest and not the room's mirror. Can we seniors claim victory for the hard-won loosening of a joint when all about us the lithe dangle from crossbars and blow the motors on treadmills? A workout tip: Even the darkest despair can be lightened by lobbing in the direction of the heedless fit the words "Just wait."

I learn that I need to find "ways to get more touch" into my life, because touching is powerful therapy that releases feel-good hormones in humans. Am I to be toucher or touchee? Both. Is the touching contingent on the availability of another human being? Not necessarily. Would a visit to a petting zoo (other than the seniors' club scene) suffice? Yes. Hugging even a hamster will do in a pinch, though dogs, cats, horses, and a neighbor are preferable. And don't shy away from baths, loofas, and massages (and masseurs and masseuses). Begin in first gear, and find your redline: "Start by making a habit of greeting friends with a hug or a cheek-to-cheek air kiss. (Of course, you'll want to check first to make sure your embrace is welcome.)" That caution shouldn't be confined to a parenthesis. Let's get it out in the open. Even in old age, with passion's outlets fragile and few, a sexual harassment defense is the last thing you want to mount.

I learn how to write a résumé not for my tombstone but to help me land on my feet in today's job market, just in case. Without calling attention to my age, I have to sell my skills and experience, which are entirely a consequence of my age. I learn that I should be inspired by how others, in particular *famous* others, have coped with adversity. I learn how to downsize recipes when a household is down to only two; the right two can "enjoy a romantic dinner." For a household of only one, the upside of the recipes presumably is leftovers the next day. I learn of "a hidden epidemic": a whopping 3 million to 5 million Americans over 50 (out of 85 million) are currently in abusive

relationships." Once again, the solitary household is not without its upside.

And in a feature on managing your portfolio (it's pretty much assumed in *AARPTM* world that you've got one), I learn that I shouldn't shy away from mutual funds. In the article, gaudily colored scoops of ice cream, stacked on cones and crammed into cups, stand for cash, bonds, and stocks, and the size of the scoops is adjusted to investment strategies at various stages of life. There's a terrifying photo of an upside-down cone, its scoop smashed, to instill in the careless old investor the psychic distress of an unsteady five-year-old.

I learn that travel is a compulsory activity for the retired. The plush, glassy bus and the extravagantly decked vessel are to be second homes. Of course, the young can travel with just a backpack and a dream, and maybe a discount railroad pass and a little weed to fuel the dream. You can measure mortality's encroachment by the distance that separates the young's "I wonder what's on the other side of that hill" from the old's "Dear God, not another hill." The movement of mature travelers is as spontaneous as a NASA mission. There may still be a backpack, but it's full of Celebrex and Actonel and Boniva, Vytorin and Lipitor and Vasotec, Colace and Beano and Imodium D—the stash the mature pilgrim, on land and sea and in the air, draws on each day to buy time. To fuel the dream, there's Lunesta.

Nothing in *AARPTM* so intrigues as a three-page announcement for "Life@50, AARP's National Event and Expo," which is to occur this fall in Anaheim, California. The words "Lights, Camera, Anaheim!" leap off a page that promises speakers, exhibits, new technologies, entertainment, lots of tours, and miles of beaches. The true-believing AARPer will make the pilgrimage and can foot the bill for airfare, hotels, Elton John, and optional tours (e.g., the Crystal Cathedral, Knott's Berry Farm, Newport by Bike, and Richard Nixon's birthplace). For three days, "Life's a beach," says the AARP website. It stops short of "What happens in Anaheim stays in Anaheim."



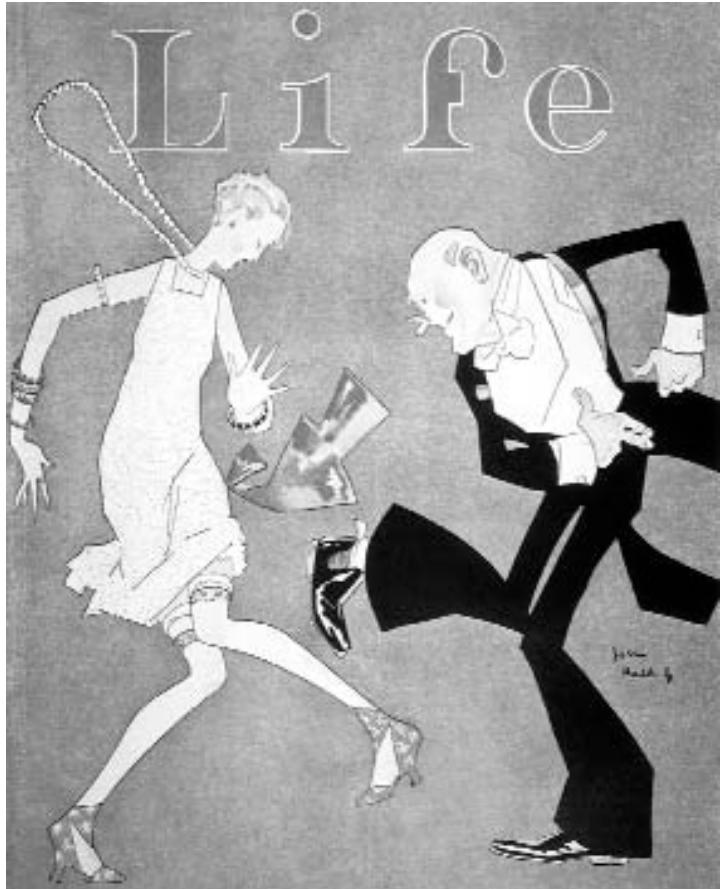
I closed the magazines, exited the websites, and resolved to let lapse neither my AARP membership nor my *Men's Journal* subscription. Why so? Because I've a hunch that a retirement bookended by fantasies has a better chance of staying upright. Besides, the fantasies play off what I know to be the realities. There are no one-size-fits-

all careers, marriages, vacations, or friendships. Why should retirements be any different? Each needs to be as customized as a signature. There's retirement chosen and sought, plotted beforehand and properly cushioned. There's retirement inattentively accepted. There's retirement embraced prematurely and retirement deferred till it is no more than a peremptory coda. And there's retirement unwelcome and resisted, ill provided for, crushing and

identity. The trick is to find a motive. That seems too obvious to bear saying, and it surely doesn't apply only to the retired state. (You can die at 35 and live another 40 years.) It's a comprehensive life insurance policy, and Socrates was one of its earliest regional agents: "The unexamined life is not worth living."

Yet the examined life can stop you in your tracks: We're born, we develop expectations, the expectations are met, or not, we suffer satisfaction or disappointment, we age, we slow, we die, we're dust. Yikes! Why get out of bed in the morning? No one can answer the question for you. "Because there's someone whose face I never tire of seeing." "Because the world's not perfect yet." "Because this day's light could be the last I'll see." "Because I've one stanza still to write in a poem." "Because I'm competing on *Senior American Idol*." "Because I have a ticket for Anaheim in October." "Because I can."

As for me, I won't be staying in bed, but I'll be skipping Anaheim, preferring dinner for one to AARP's banquet. And if I have to make my own dinner conversation, well, at least I'm compatibly matched. Talking to yourself should be an allowable indulgence of age anyway, though it's a potential embarrassment too. If you pace and mutter at home, you may forget to leave the habit at the front door when you go out, and one-sided exchanges of Wildean aplomb are just creepy in a supermarket aisle. But thanks to technology, we vocal soliloquizers can now move about in society without leaving a judgment of madness in our wake: Wear a microheadset, and win an automatic pass! You won't



On the cover of *Life* magazine in 1926: "Teaching an Old Dog New Tricks."

diminishing, imposing financial hardship and physical and spiritual want. In every case, a new vacuum of time needs to be filled—or not—and the resources brought to filling the time *before* retirement, by no means financial resources only, will be invaluable in the days after.

One day you're a plastic-IDed, benefits-laden, purposeful employee; the next, you're on the sidewalk. It's as if you'd gone into a witness protection program, except that you have no protection at all. Even surrounded by family and friends, you're on your own making that new

need a phone to go with the headset, because you're on both ends of the line anyway. Just don't let any wires dangle too conspicuously free. The penalty is that you'll be thought to have joined the zombie ranks of public cellers. Conversations come no smaller than theirs and swarm now like gnats through the common air. Is the pardon worth the shame? Your call. Once again.

The essential thing is to keep moving, with your headset or without, dodging and weaving, even while you're perfectly still, to evade the Pale Rider's expert lasso. ■