

IDEAS

# Who you callin' 'young man'?

Of all the things I never thought I'd have to develop as an older person, it's a sense of humor about the casual condescension of total strangers.

By **Bob Regan** Updated September 18, 2024, 11:00 p.m.



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“How are you today, young man?” An innocent enough query, but I bristle and stifle a fleeting urge to slap the half-smile off the grocery clerk’s ruddy face.

Why?

I am not a “young man” and could hardly be mistaken for one. Would he use the same salutation with someone 20 years my junior? I doubt it. I get a whiff of condescension, even mocking, in his joviality, and I don’t like it. Even so, there will be no incident in the checkout line today. I merely take a breath, muster a half-smile of my own, and reply, “When they start calling you ‘young man,’ you know you’re anything but.”

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Infantilization of the aging and the aged has likely always been with us, but now, for the first time, it's being directed at me. Me, of all people! In my mind's eye, if not the mirror's, I'm still a strapping, energetic middle age. Well, late middle age, but still. I'm not ready to be talked down to by those striding the high plains of youth, to be looked down upon as I navigate my late-life passage through the canyons below, ever nearer the endless deep. (That is a bit dramatic, I'll admit.)

The attitude toward me and my cohort seems to be, at best, a slightly amused tolerance or, at worst, a barely concealed scorn, the unspoken message being "Go gently into that good night — or not. Just go."

Back in the car, I take another breath and attempt an objective assessment of my (over?) reaction. Hmm. What exactly did I expect? Didn't this exchange take place on Senior Discount Thursday? Moreover, haven't I been taking the reduced rate for haircuts, for movie tickets, been ordering from the 55+ menu at IHOP, feeling like I was "getting one over" on all of them? I wasn't. I'd been eligible for those discounts for 10 years. Hell, 20 years for IHOP. Grow up, Bob! Wait — I already have. More than that, I've grown old. There, I've said it.

Punk



I can't help but wonder if, in addition to society's infantilizing me, I'm piling on. Am I allowing my so-called

“second childhood” to devolve into toddlerhood, tantrums and all? Am I failing to “act my age?” Do I need time-outs? Soothe myself with too much screen time? Give myself permission to whine (“It’s not fair!”), be cranky and demanding?

Maybe I’m not a blameless victim of ageism. Maybe I, too, am a perp.

And what, do I suppose, is the net effect of tens of millions of us Boomers behaving — or more accurately, misbehaving — thusly on a daily basis? What deterioration of the public discourse is attributable to hordes of us golden-years grumps with too much time on our hands, too high an opinion of our opinions, and too many petty grievances weaponized and seeking targets? I would prefer not to contemplate this too deeply.

I start the car and head for home with new resolve. The next time someone extends a small courtesy, I will try to accept it, showing the same grace to others as I would like them to show me. When my son or daughter waves me off from climbing a ladder or hefting a 50-pound bag of Quikcrete, I will acquiesce. And the next time some well-meaning someone greets me with “How are you today, young man?” I will smile and say, “Very well, and how are you, younger man?”

*Bob Regan, 75, is a songwriter in Nashville and the founder of [OperationSong.org](https://www.operation-song.org).*

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