

Francis Bacon
 “Of Youth and Age”

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) was a major figure in the development of the English Renaissance. He became known at court and was knighted in 1603 after the succession of James I. He was later appointed Lord Chancellor in 1618 but fell from power in 1621 after going into debt and being accused of corruption. Bacon is sometimes known as the “father of the scientific method” for publishing the *Novum Organum Scientiarum* (the New Instrument of Science) in 1620. In this work, he advocated using the empirical method (induction) in all enquiries, as opposed to the “old method” (deduction) of the scholastics of the middle ages.

Bacon published the first edition of his *Essays* in 1597. He borrowed the word *essay* from the French writer Michel de Montaigne. It meant an attempt or trial, somewhat like the fragments and proverbs that were popular at the time. He wrote a second edition in 1612 and published an expanded edition in 1625.

Information readily available on the internet has not been glossed. Additions are in brackets [like this].

A man that is young in years may be old in hours, if he have lost no time. But that happeneth rarely. Generally, youth is like the first cogitations, not so wise as the second. For there is a youth in thoughts, as well as in ages. And yet the invention of young men is more lively than that of old, and imaginations stream into their minds better, and as it were, more divinely. Natures that have much heat and great and violent desires and perturbations are not ripe for action till they have passed the meridian of their years, as it was with Julius Caesar and Septimius Severus [Roman emperor (145-211)], of the latter of whom it is said, *Juventutem egit erroribus, imo furoribus, plenam* [His youth was spent in folly, even madness]. And yet he was the ablest emperor, almost, of all the list. But reposed natures may do well in youth, as it is seen in Augustus Caesar, Cosmus Duke of Florence [Piero di Cosimo de' Medici], Gaston de Foix, and others. On the other side, heat and vivacity in age is an excellent composition for business. Young men are fitter to invent, than to judge, fitter for execution than for counsel, and fitter for new projects than for settled business. For the experience of age, in things that fall within the compass of it, directeth them; but in new things, abuseth them. The errors of young men are the ruin of business, but the errors of aged men amount but to this, that more might have been done, or sooner. Young men, in the conduct and manage of actions, embrace more than they can hold; stir more than they can quiet; fly to the end, without consideration of the means and degrees; pursue some few principles which they have chanced upon absurdly; care not to innovate, which draws unknown inconveniences; use extreme remedies at first; and, that which doubleth all errors, will not acknowledge or retract them; like an unready horse that will neither stop nor turn. Men of age object too much, consult too long, adventure too little, repent too soon, and seldom drive business home to the full period, but content themselves with a mediocrity of success. Certainly it is good to compound employments of both, for that will be good for the present because the virtues of either age may correct the defects of both; and good for succession, that young men may be learners while men in age are actors; and, lastly, good for external accidents, because authority followeth old men, and favor and popularity, youth. But for the moral part, perhaps youth will have the pre-eminence, as age hath for politics. A certain Rabbi, upon the text, “Your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams,” inferreth that young men are admitted nearer to God than old,

because vision is a clearer revelation than a dream. And certainly, the more a man drinketh of the world, the more it intoxicateth; and age doth profit rather in the powers of understanding, than in the virtues of the will and affections. There be some who have an over-early ripeness in their years, which fadeth betimes. These are, first, such as have brittle wits, the edge whereof is soon turned; such as was Hermogenes the rhetorician, whose books are exceeding subtle, but who afterwards waxed stupid. A second sort, is of those that have some natural dispositions which have better grace in youth than in age, such as is a fluent and luxuriant speech, which becomes youth well, but not age: so Tully [Marcus Tullius Cicero] saith of Hortensius, *Idem manebat, neque idem decebat* [He stayed the same when it was no longer appropriate.]. The third is of such as take too high a strain at the first, and are magnanimous more than tract of years can uphold. As was Scipio Africanus, of whom Livy saith in effect, *Ultima primis cedebant* [His old age did not match his youth.].

Topics for Writing and Discussion

1. Some of you may just be starting out on life's journey, while others are further along the path. In your group or class, discuss what you think are the benefits of being young versus being older. As one grows older, does one gain wisdom? Should one try to remain young as long as possible? When does one pass from youth to age?
2. Today we segregate people by age, many older people living in retirement communities or homes. In the recent past, however, extended families lived together, or at least near one another. Do you live close to a grandparent? Interview a grandparent or an older person and write a report on what they tell you they have learned as they have grown older and whether they are more satisfied with their life now than when they were younger.
3. What do you think your own life will look like when you are older? Write a short essay projecting yourself into the future, when you are forty, or fifty, or even older. What do you think your life will be like?