

W. KENT OLSON

# At 70, my attitude is 'give me more'

**I**n August, I achieved my three-score-and-10, which feels biblically good. Older peers say I'm a pup. Their wry comeuppance of me is the long perspective of people who have accrued wisdom over decades, like tree rings in a big pine. They dispense it without malice, and I listen keenly.

To a person, they say life seems impossibly fast, where did it go? This I, too, understand.

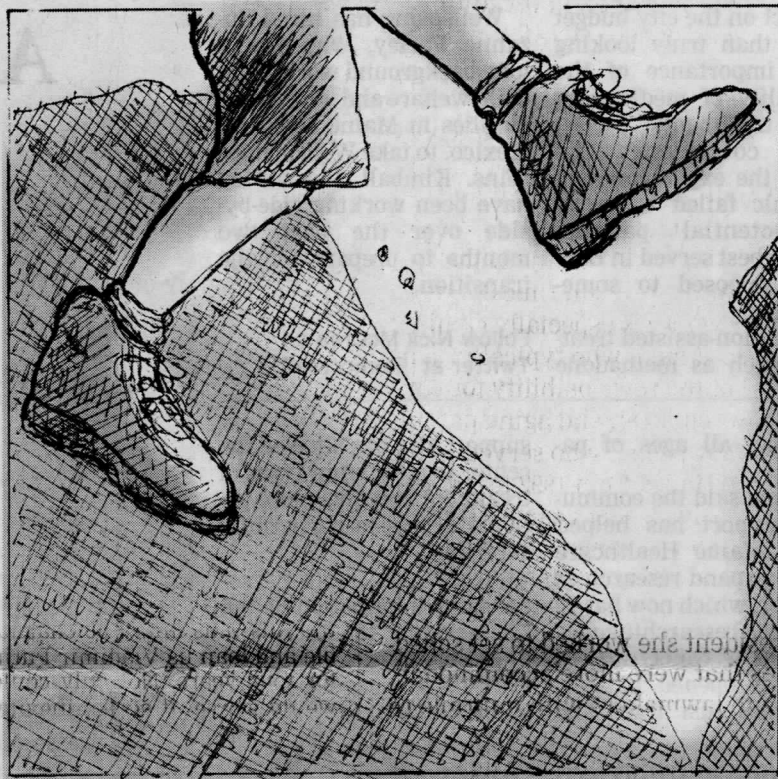
In the 1960s, I worked in the Appalachian Mountain Club's White Mountain huts, my five most formative summers. That was yesterday — I was 17 forever. Then I looked away from the mountains just a moment and, today, I find myself in the entryway to my eighth decade, the door slammed shut behind me. As in "The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam," the moving finger wrote and moved on: "Nor all thy Piety nor Wit/ Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,/ Nor all thy tears wash out a Word of it."

That is how it works.

Some of Maine's wisest newspaper writing comes from Richard Dudman, a longtime BDN columnist, whose graceful immersion into his 90s (the tenth decade) is a generous tale of adapting to aging (and its insults) with humor and practicality — he installed handrails at home to stay upright. I'm not there yet, but I surely creak and hobble when rising from a chair.

There's the smallish pouch at my waist of the kind increasingly seen on my male peers, even the ectomorphs. Little buntings of skin drape where sinew used to rule. But I'm not yet sans teeth, sans eyes. The cornucopia still is fat with fruit.

Three of my five knee injuries happened in the mountain years (four leg casts, one surgery, before the advent of arthroscopy), then



OP ART BY GEORGE DANBY

an ex post facto back operation (1990s) caused by overdone hut days. A hutman, you should know, was an industrial backpacker who hauled loads of, in my case, up to 127 pounds uphill and 193 pounds downhill. It was doable then. I was only an average packer but brought in respectable poundages reliably. All of us flaunted our physical invincibility, hubris jazzed by teen testosterone.

Now I can't fathom how my mortal coil did it.

My objectives for bone and ligament consist today of staying off knee or hip replacements. I tested one palliative on the Allagash in June, a cot weighing under 3 pounds that keeps your body 5 inches above the hummocky ground. One

hopes to remain above ground long term.

I had six nights of pain-free sleeping, and my afflicted joints more comfortable than at home even, meaning I can camp more into my dotage.

Adaptations include rethinking my hiking outlook. I tend now to call it "walking," a purely psychological manipulation of language. I ski fewer hours but more safely and comfortably. Canoeing and kayaking remain on the agenda, but help getting vessels onto a roof rack is appreciated.

You experience, as you age, a three-prong paradox: going knock-out dumb encountering new ideas and buoyant people; being unsurprised by repulsive behaviors; and dismissing charlatans swiftly. Collected years enable you to

see through a glass clearly, spotting inanities and vexatious souls, such as Donald Trump and Paul LePage, for example, who are to governance as quackery is to medicine.

Younger friends gripe about growing older. I acknowledge this widespread view but don't really understand it except for cases of abject misery. I'm no Pollyanna. Too many relatives and friends suffer body or mind debilitations. The number who die climbs faster than before. My heart breaks for anyone in pain, and there I appreciate some who deem life too onerous.

My eagerness for extended positive living is tintured with appreciation of tragedy, disease, wracking grief. The best we ourselves can do is carry on with empathy, humility and gratitude.

Seven decades gone, my attitude is "give me more." I loved my 30 years in conservation running three nonprofits. And the retirement transition (at 59) was easy, offering new objectives and explorations, physical, mental and spiritual. I am greedy for three decades more of health, acuity and contribution. As George Burns said on attaining a similar later-life milestone: "It's been a great life, and I hope the second half is just as exciting."

Henry David Thoreau believed heaven lay hard beneath our feet, like rock. To him, literal eternity was that of the present moment. As I walk Acadia's granite mountains and trundle toward my actual old age, those are useful tropes.

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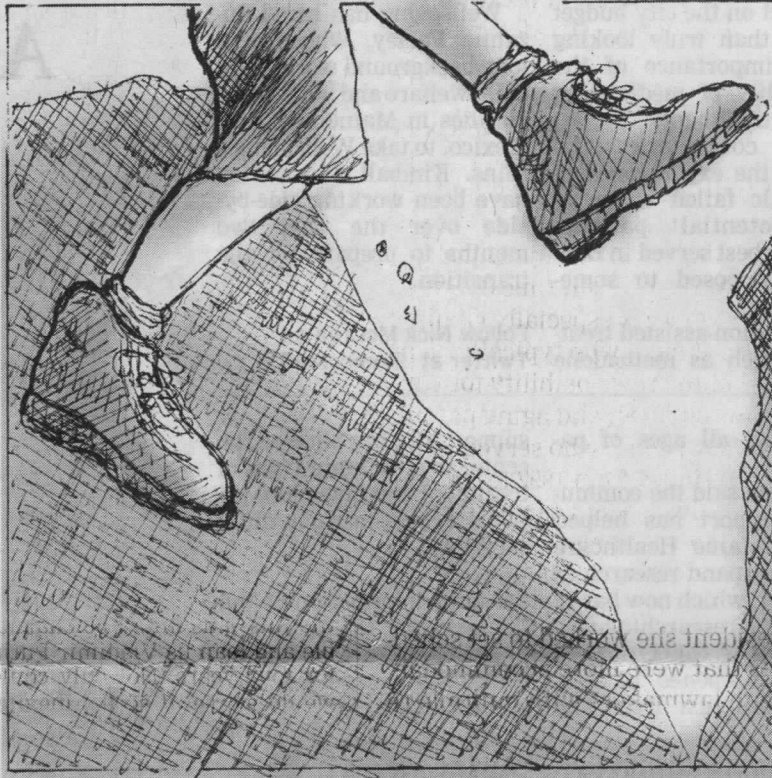
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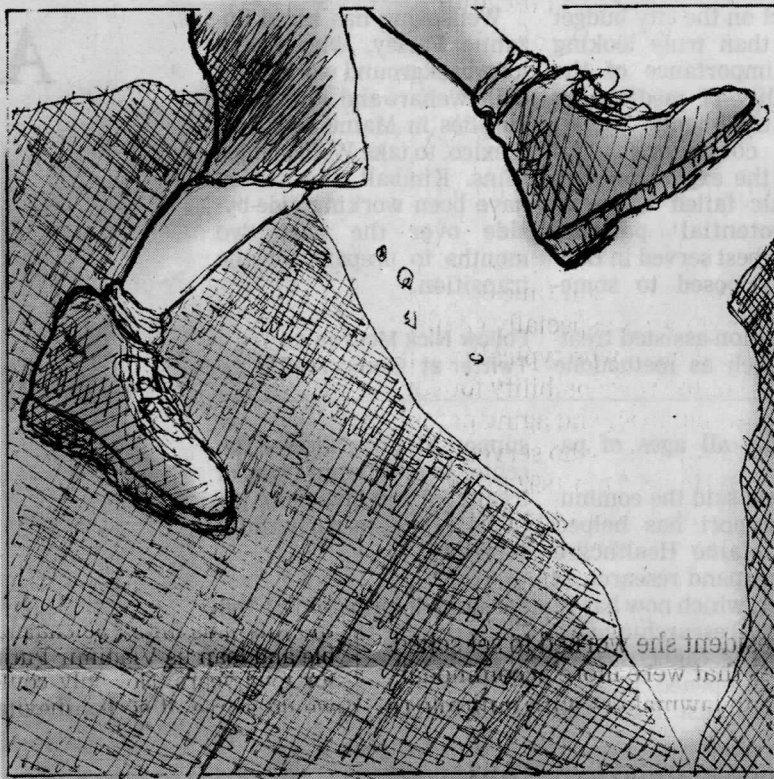
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