

## THE SEVEN AGES OF MAN

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I am sorry to have to announce to you at the very beginning of this paper that it will not be very long. I am sure that makes you sad, but I do have a good excuse. I was not scheduled to give a paper this year, so I had not begun working on my next presentation, since I usually only spend about one year in preparation of my papers.

Since it was necessary for the society to do some re-scheduling, due to holy days and spring vacation, it appeared that we would only have one paper presented tonight, so I was asked to fill in. Evidently, since I have no children in school, rarely take vacations, and am not known to be very faithful in observing holy days, it was assumed that I might be able to fill the vacant position, so I agreed to do so.

At first I thought that I might pull out some paper delivered years ago, knowing that I would not be the first member to do so. I could easily have gotten away with that, for two reasons. First of all, many were given so long ago that no more than three or four of you would have heard it before. And second, as I recall, nobody paid much attention to them the first time, so I don't think anyone would know that they were hearing the same paper twice. But then I decided to lay aside some of my pressing duties and work on this paper, which I will now present.

It has been my pleasure – during my long and mediocre career as a psychologist, to teach courses on human growth and development – the first as a teaching assistant when in graduate school – and lately as a retired person, who can afford to work for the rather meager remuneration given to what are called *adjunct faculty members*, who now teach about 40% of the college courses offered by schools in this country.

My special area of expertise – as that word is loosely used – has been clinical psychology, so the study of human development has been more of a hobby or avocation in which I have indulged myself in my spare time and retirement.

My classes in developmental psychology at Fort Campbell are made up of about 90% female soldiers and wives of enlisted men. Teaching modern young women, most of whom are in their 20's or 30's (and nearly all of whom are pretty), can be one of life's simple pleasures. But it can be humbling. One class member noticed my reference to historical events recently (many of them have never heard of such things as thalidomide or marking babies) and asked how long I had been teaching the subject. I told her that my first effort was in 1959 and then added that I knew that was before she was born. Her disturbing reply was "Oh that was before my mother was born!"

In the past I have given papers on cowboy shows, Tarzan of the apes, Sherlock Holmes, and Cinderella, and I have been subjected to a fair amount of criticism for my preoccupation with rather non-intellectual, if not to say childish subjects. So tonight I hope to enhance my reputation somewhat by moving up the literary hierarchy and giving a paper on Shakespeare. My presentation is entitled *The Seven Ages of Man*.

In 1947, as a freshman in high school, our English teacher gave us William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* as a reading assignment. Today I cannot recall much about the complicated plot of that play, even though I made a good grade on the test.

But I do recall one part of the play in which Shakespeare described what he called the "seven ages of man." That part stuck with me, and even today, as I peruse the published literature on developmental psychology I am impressed with the uncanny insight of that relatively uneducated 17<sup>th</sup> century playwright.

Sometimes the application of rigid scientific procedures yields results that are not inconsistent with information that can be found embedded in poetry, folklore, and even old wives' tales. Perhaps George Bernard Shaw – another playwright – had something when he offered as a definition of the science of psychology: "the tedious exposition of the obvious."

In Act 2 of *As You Like It*, Shakespeare has his character, Jacques, make the following observations about human growth and development:

*All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time*

*plays many parts. His acts being seven ages.*

*At first the infant, mewling and puking in his mother's arms;*

*Then the whining school boy, with his satchel and shining morning face. Creeping like snail unwillingly to school.*

*And then the lover, sighing like a furnace, with a woeful ballad, made to his mistress' eyebrow.*

*Then a soldier, full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard, jealous in honor, sudden and quick in a quarrel, seeking the bubble reputation even in the cannon's mouth.*

*And then the justice, in fair round belly with good capon line'd, with eyes and beard of formal cut.*

*The sixth age slips into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon with spectacles on nose and pouch on side...his big, manly voice turning again toward childish treble, pipes and whistles in his sound.*

*Last scene of all, that ends this strange eventful history, is second childishness, and mere oblivion; sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.*

The bard did show admirable insight into the human condition, and his observations are not out of keeping with those of the great human development theorists who began to set forth their ideas almost three centuries later.

Shakespeare's "mewling and puking" baby is not unlike Sigmund Freud's description of the newborn, who he suggested was first in the oral stage of psychosexual development, then the anal stage, with their early habit of putting everything in their mouths, and then their fascination with their own acts of elimination.

My favorite developmental psychologist, Jean Piaget, saw the infant as being in the *sensorimotor stage*, as they do nothing but sense and move all parts of their bodies randomly for the first two years of life.

And the playwright's view of early and middle childhood, with the school age boy trudging reluctantly to school is not unlike the stages that Freud referred to as phallic and latent (Freud was preoccupied with the sexual aspect of life). During this time children prefer the company of those of their own gender and develop their sexual identity.

Piaget saw this period as the stage of concrete operations, which was his way of referring to their concretistic and rule-conscious way of thinking, and it is during this time, from about age five to 12, that they achieve most of their basic learning skills, the rest of life being merely a matter of gilding the cognitive lily.

With puberty comes Shakespeare's "lover stage," during which young boys (and young girls, as well) become aware of something they never noticed before but which they will never forget. Freud called this the *genital stage*, and Eric Erikson called it the *stage of identity crisis*, when adolescents are trying to figure out who they are and what they want to be.

The fourth, or "soldier stage" you will recall in your own life, because that is when you may have thought about getting a motorcycle and when you were more likely to invite some offensive person outside than you have been since. And some of you even joined the army and devoted your aggressive energy to something constructive. Indeed, the battle fields of history are strewn with the bones of young men who were caught up at that time of life when they were most eager to fight for whatever was deemed honorable at the time.

In Shakespeare's fifth or "justice stage" most of us developed a little belly, but we dressed more formally and took our place in the workaday world. Erikson said that it is at this stage that we have to develop intimacy relationships if we are to enjoy the rest of our lives.

By the sixth stage you knew that you were mortal, and, if fortunate, you began to look with some pride at your place in business and community. You may even have thought about running for one of the local offices or doing something else to assure the continuity of your civilization for the sake of generations to come. Some even experience a kind of "midlife crisis," during which they look for some way of recapturing the feelings of youth – it might be a sportier automobile, a flirtation, or just a new way of combing one's hair, but mercifully the stage is usually short lived.

What Shakespeare describes as the seventh and “last scene of all” is couched in melancholy terms by the bard, and it is here that I must take some issue with him. He focuses only on the negatives – the fact that dental problems develop, and sensory abilities begin to fail. But perhaps his view is understandable when you consider that the life expectancy in the 1600’s was less than 40 years, and the few people who reached the seventh stage in his day were unlikely to resemble the so-called senior citizens of our time.

Of course, Shakespeare could know nothing about root canals, cataract surgery, hearing aids, bypass operations, knee replacements, or what urologists can do nowadays with prostate problems.

But in addition to the advances in medical technology, gerontologists have identified a number of factors that tend to promote longevity and better health for older people. Many of these positive factors are things over which we have no control, such as being female (they live longer than men on the average), having long lived ancestors, being Caucasian, or being a nun rather than a monk (since nuns, on the average, outlive monks). But we cannot select our genes.

Another thing that Shakespeare did not know about was Alzheimer’s Disease, since in his day not many people lived long enough to get it. But it is interesting that in his tragedy, *King Lear*, he writes of an aging monarch who is unable to recall the names of his daughter or close friends but who describes himself not unlike the way one might describe a patient with the symptoms of Alzheimer’s today.

But on the positive side, many factors affecting longevity are behavioral or lifestyle factors. Of course, you can’t be a nun, rather than a monk, but statistically your chances of living long seem to be enhanced by being physically active, better educated, employed well into old age, not being overweight, sleeping less than nine hours per night, using some alcohol but in moderation, not using tobacco at all, living in the country rather than in the city, and being married (the idea expressed by some cynic that married men do not actually live longer, it just seems longer, is not true). All of these factors have been found to correlate with longevity, and you have some control over them. You can associate with people, you can stay active, you can drink moderately, and you can not smoke.

So in conclusion, let me say that the point of this paper, if there is one, is that one may discover much truth in poetry, fables, and even fairy tales. That is what I have tried to show in my papers on such topics as Cinderella and Tarzan of the Apes. And it is a fertile field. The late Dr. Tom Riley once criticized that I might come in next with a paper on Little Orphan Annie. Not so, but I have not yet approached the highly symbolic stories of Goldilocks, that little red riding hood girl, or Alice in Wonderland.