

Viva the Vital

July 10, 2008

Boomers and the Genetic Lottery

Two weeks ago in this space we talked about how Boomers are fairly confident they will live until age 90, 95 or even 100, thanks to the longevity revolution and advances in medical technology. We got two reactions on the column we'd like to share here.

First, a reader pointed out the recent sudden death of 58-year-old Tim Russert, the Boomer-aged television political anchor. It spooked them, and their friends, because, obviously, not all Boomers are going to make it to 100. The unasked question was who will make it and who won't.

That's like asking who will win the lottery. Who, indeed?

In "Mine is Longer than Yours," an article by Michael Kinsley in *The New Yorker* magazine in April, he calculated the rate of survival of 100 Americans who "start the voyage of life together." He wrote that "on average one of them will have died by the time the group turns sixteen. At forty, their lives are half over: further life expectancy at age forty is 39.9. And at age sixty-three the group starts losing an average of one person every year. Then it accelerates. By age seventy-five, sixty-seven of the original hundred are left. By age one hundred, three remain."

Let's do the math. Of the 3.7 million Boomers who are Tim Russert's age, 58, about 37,000 probably won't make it to age 59. That's a one out of a hundred chance, which are exponentially better odds than winning the lottery. The inevitability of that math should soften the surprise next time when someone "our age" dies. Those deaths may be sudden, but they should no longer be unexpected.

The second reaction from the piece on how Boomers might approach aging came from someone on the other side already, 98-year-old Tom Austin. Tom emailed (yes, *emailed*) that he'd like to talk about the column. He admitted he's a little deaf so a visit would work better than the phone. I met with him last week.

Tom lives in an assisted living facility nearby, having been a resident since 1994. His wife passed in 1995, and with his only daughter (age 73) living in Chicago, he has been managing on his own for 14 years. Physically, he tells me, he feels fine. He still doesn't "feel old," although he knows from the calendar he qualifies for that description. Pointing to an electric motorized chair, Tom said he lost functional use of his legs in 2004, and that's the first time he felt that growing older was a hindrance of any sort.

A Naval officer and navigator in World War II, Tom still loves the sea and began taking adventure cruises on board freighters and container ships in 1999 at the age of 91. In fact, his weak legs are the only reason he's starting to feel old at all. He misses those trips and is quick to share photos of his cruises to South Africa, throughout the Mediterranean and even to China to see the building of the Three Gorges Dam.

He's still surprisingly active, participating in "Out to Lunch Bunch" trips to Monticello and other venues, and firing off letters to university presidents and editors of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*.

Tom readily admits his longevity is just his lucky break. His parents lived until their early 80's, so he's as surprised as anyone that he's on track to reach age 100.

As someone half his age, I wanted to know all his secrets. He credits his even-keeled temperament. He says he never would get overly excited or very angry. He also thinks that he was always quite frank and upfront with people. He thinks his belief in the Almighty has served him well. Half jokingly, he credits a 40-year ritual of two ounces of scotch nightly. But that's been replaced by two baby aspirin these days.

Tom's biggest piece of advice wasn't medical or lifestyle related, but financial. He warned that it "costs a lot of money to live this long. It costs \$30,000 a year just to live here." He advises others to buy long term care insurance now. "Plan ahead," he said. "I had no idea I'd be retired for 35 years."

Like my grandmother who lived to 102, Tom wonders a little why he's still here. The fact that he emailed to talk about growing older suggests his work isn't done. There's a whole generation that could benefit from what he knows. That is, if we plan ahead.