

With Wings as Eagles

WHEN William Grimes was editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, nothing annoyed him more than references to his age. "If anyone calls me a senior citizen," he said on one occasion, "I'll hit him with my crutch."

Perry Gresham, a septuagenarian who is some years retired as a very active head of Bethany College in West Virginia, is not as vociferous as Bill Grimes about our national penchant for shuffling people into age categories. But, as he makes plain in *With Wings as Eagles*, he resents stereotyping that deprives people of the chance for active lives long before their vital energies have been used up.

The old, he suggests, have become an endangered species in America. "Old daddy gov'mint" has done its best to make "seniority" and "senility" interchangeable words. A third

of the nation is supposed, at age 65 or thereabouts, to get out of the work force and start living on that Social Security funny money that could have been real wealth if daddy gov'mint had only allowed people the alternative of making their own investments.

The Congress that passes the laws that discriminate against "senior citizens" is entirely hypocritical. It has no mandatory retirement age for itself. Yet it sets limits on what the 65-year-old can earn and still collect the full Social Security that he has been paying for all those years under the illusion that he was buying insurance.

Inflation, of course, is the bane of the elderly who are compelled by the national stereotype to accept the burden of living on fixed incomes. The villain in inflation is the same

government that has decreed an arbitrary cutoff for people in the working force.

In California, Old Man Jarvis, himself an exciting and energetic septuagenarian, actually succeeded in doing something about the two jaws of the "vise" (rising prices and increasing taxes) that work such a hardship on those on fixed incomes. The Jarvis crusade against the property tax is a heartening harbinger. Following the California example, the elderly can, as Perry Gresham says, "mobilize for less government instead of more, for fewer taxes instead of more benefits."

Meanwhile Perry Gresham is not waiting on the tax rebellion to do something for people. Like Leonard Read, he believes in exemplarity. He discovered, on a rainy night in St. Louis when he was making notes for a speech on "Life Begins at Seventy," that he had all too negligently accepted a scenario of the human life-cycle that put him on a plateau that must give way to slow

decline and death. It suddenly occurred to him that life was a matter of several peaks of achievement, not merely one. Perry Gresham speaks of experiencing something he calls "the surge of the sixties." It was equivalent to the athletes' second wind.

The concept of new surges sent Perry Gresham to the history books. He discovered that six of Plato's greatest dialogues were written in the two decades before his death at 79. Socrates was cut off at age 70 by a rigged court that had condemned him to death for being all too effective as a teacher. Goethe wrote some of his greatest poetry in his seventies. Benjamin Franklin was active in the Constitutional convention in his eighties. To come closer to home, Henry Hazlitt writes as clearly and cogently about economics in his eighties as he did in his fifties.

Life, says Perry Gresham, is duration. The concept was Henri Bergson's, who thought that aging persons, who had greater reservoirs of experience from which to draw,

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*Fierce no more is the spectre of old age
I now see life as a series of renewals
Senility is for those who abuse the body
Or fail to qualify for renewal
Despondency is for those who fail
to find new challenges
Loneliness is for those who fail to cultivate new friends
Despair is for those who have lost their nerve
I have faced all these spectres
and I have defeated them
With eagle wings I soar above them
Old age is truly better than youth or middle years
I have earned the right to be wise
And to enjoy the inner splendor which has replaced
The external concerns of the busiest years.*

PERRY E. GRESHAM

could contribute much to creative evolution. Pondering Bergson on duration and his own experience with the "surge of the sixties," Perry Gresham decided that men could be betrayed by defective images. Some of the images are mechanical. There is, for instance, the "old-car" theory. An old car can take just so many repairs. Brakes can be relined, even new engines may be substituted, but bodies nevertheless wear out in the allotted time.

Biological images can be just as discouraging. There is the "old-tree" theory. Eventually the sturdiest

tree trunk must become a rotting log returning to the earth.

Perry Gresham discovered that if he rejected mechanical and biological images in favor of his "surge" theory, life became a matter of successive renewals. The title of his book comes from the Prophet Isaiah: "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles." The fear of death is a "disease of Europe." It is what comes of faulty images, such as that of the "old car" or the "old tree." But if one is willing to "wait upon the Lord"

and accept the theory of renewals, one ceases to worry about death.

Much of Perry Gresham's book is a celebration of the scriptural exaltation of faith as the substance of things hoped-for, the evidence of things not seen. But, though he pays tribute to Oriental cultures which have little terror of the prospect of dying, Perry Gresham is like any other incurable Westerner when it comes to self-help in postponing the day when there will be no more earthly surges of energy.

He has good rules for sustaining old friendships and cultivating new ones. He believes in the therapeutic values of games and dieting, but warns against being fanatic and boring about either. He believes in listening as well as in speaking. The vice of self-centeredness must be combatted—it is what makes one morose and dissatisfied even among interesting people. "The cultivating of an other-regarding point of view," says Perry Gresham, "is a lifelong experience, but seventy is a good time to start if it hasn't been started earlier."

We have lived through the years of the baby boom and the tyranny of the young. Now that our population is growing older, Perry Gresham's surge philosophy may find a bigger audience than would have been possible in the Nineteen Sixties. The officially sanctioned retirement age has recently been jumped from 65 to

70. Congress feels more complacent about letting those on Social Security earn more without being penalized for being productive. Who knows, if Perry Gresham can get a good hearing for his eagle-wing point of view, maybe Congress will ditch all those laws that treat the elderly with contempt. ☉

CUTTING BACK CITY HALL

by Robert W. Poole, Jr.

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New York, N.Y. 10016)

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Reviewed by Brian Summers

AMERICANS have grown used to thinking that the quality of local services rises and falls with tax rates. Thus, anyone proposing a tax cut is immediately accused of wanting to reduce already inadequate services.

This, Robert Poole shows, need not be the case. Local taxes can be cut while services are maintained—if not vastly improved!

Take the example of mass transit. Any talk of a tax cut is immediately met with threats of fare hikes and reduced schedules. But there is no reason why mass transit should be a city-run monopoly. As Poole shows with actual cases, private buses, jitneys, gypsy cabs, shared-ride cabs, car pools and van pools provide bet-