

The Perpetual Youth of Solomon Marcus

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Those privileged to have known Solomon Marcus for years or decades know him as an individual of an exceedingly rare kind. While it is rare to reach ones 85th anniversary in such fine form, if at all, it is not this quality that makes Marcus rare to me. While it is rare to be such a wide ranging polymath, so accomplished in so many areas, it is not this quality that makes Marcus rare to me. What I find rare about Solomon Marcus is his intellectual youth.

For most people, intellectual growth occurs at an early age. After that, the same skills, with incremental evolution, are applied over the course of an entire career and indeed an entire life. How many individuals have we met who, at the age of 40 or 60, are still working on minor variations of their doctoral theses? On the path of a full life, a decade of advanced education is only a short part. In that period of a few years it is tempting to believe one has become educated, or at least that one has learned how to learn. In reality, education usually occurs as a short impulse that touches life at a moment. But as life moves on we change, the world changes, and our interactions with the world change. Even among the learned, expertise becomes increasingly irrelevant over time. It is all too easy to become caught in a backwater, relics in our own time.

A geometer will explain that, locally, all paths look the same: in a small enough neighbourhood any curve, no matter how interesting, looks linear. This is why our predecessors were surprised in antiquity to learn the world was round, why we are surprised every generation when the stock market crashes, and why we are surprised today by global climate change.

Why is the typical intellectual growth so short compared to a lifetime? In part it is because we need to gather some skills as we embark on our lives, and thereafter, within a short horizon, life seems stable and there is less pressure to learn new things. But also, in youth we are more open to learning. Just as youthful limbs mend more quickly when bones break, youthful minds adapt when their world-view breaks.

This is what struck me immediately about Solomon Marcus, this quality of his youthful mind. I know no-one who has followed better the world's turns and life's twists. At 85, Marcus has absorbed more, adapted more and been more productive since formal retirement, than most people are over their entire lives. It is in this way that Solomon Marcus is a rare man. He is younger in mind and spirit at 85 than most of my colleagues who are half his age.

I appreciate deeply our new friendship, kindled only this year upon meeting in London Ontario. When he arrived at our home, Marcus paid more sincere attention to our children than any colleague in many years. Over dinner, the conversation ranged far and wide, steered by Marcus through a delightful course, from great ideas to surprising trivia to engaging personal stories.

I look forward to our next meetings, hoping only that I do not become too conservative and set in my ways to appreciate this spritely man. Felicitations to you on your birthday, my friend.