You Are Old, Father William, the Young (Pilot) Said

By Matt Herron

You are old, Father William," the young man said,
"And your hair has become very white;
And yet you incessantly stand on your head –
Do you think, at your age, it is right?"
"In my youth," Father William replied to his son,
"I feared it might injure the brain;
But now that I'm perfectly sure I have none,
Why, I do it again and again."
(Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*)

It's been some time since I've looped a glider, but I'm pretty sure I could still stand one on its head. Nevertheless, at 84, I no longer feel the overpowering urge to turn somersaults in the sky. I love flying cross country, I still enjoy flying competitions, and I find it particularly satisfying to mentor younger pilots just shedding their cross country pin feathers. With 14 flying years and more than 1,400 hours under my belt, I still feel like I've got some good sky miles ahead, and my brain feels mostly uninjured, but of course the ugly question now arises: *for how long*?

Aging glider pilots face a number of special challenges, especially since there's no FAA medical to flunk, and the choice of when to hang up the parachute is primarily our own. Will we truly recognize it when the time comes and if not, can we depend on some honest friend to confront us with the sad news?

Unless we are unfortunate enough to encounter a sudden cardiac or vascular emergency, aging mostly occurs gradually. Our reaction times, our powers of judgment, our situational awareness all deteriorate imperceptibly over time, and since many of us are prone to sag comfortably into the complacency of age, we may not recognize the decline when it becomes serious.

A few years ago, I flew second-in-command with an experienced contest pilot about my age, who, it turned out, was nearing the end of his career. After some distance on course toward a final turnpoint during a contest, he suddenly banked sharply to the left. "Where are you going?" I asked. "I'm heading for the mark," he replied. "But our mark was dead ahead," I cautioned, and after some reflection he resumed the proper course. What might have happened, had he been alone? Possibly nothing – I have no way of knowing – but since this was one of several puzzling mistakes … I was pretty sure I didn't want to fly with him again, and I began wondering if he should fly at all. Did I undertake that fraught and suddenly necessary conversation with him? I did, and as it happened, we remained friends. Sometime later, he ended a long, eventful soaring career without ever becoming a statistic. It was a good finish.

Speaking from my own side of the aging divide, I can attest to another pitfall of becoming a bit long in the tooth. The soaring community begins to look at one with more questioning eyes. "Is Father William maybe headed around the bend?" I can almost hear them ask. Under such scrutiny the smallest mistake may become a major pitfall.

In my own case, some perceived or actual lapse that has never been explained to me caused the safety committee of my soaring club to hold a meeting about my fitness to fly. There was apparently disagreement among committee members, the outcome of which was a request that I make an evaluation flight with the committee's CFIG. This was a perfectly reasonable requirement that I was happy to comply with, and the flight concluded uneventfully. But the question stayed with me: would this have happened had I been 35?

I don't necessarily object to increased scrutiny so long as it is conducted without prejudice or preconceptions – it probably serves the same useful purpose as a BFR. But the fact remains that it puts an additional burden on any aging pilot. Like all of us, I have always tried to avoid mistakes; but now I *hate* to make them!

The fading of powers is delivered to us in three special flavors: *aging*, the physical declines that are a normal by-product of getting older; *senescence*, which is often conflated with aging, but I prefer to define as the accumulated damage to the body that begins to interfere with its ability to function; and *senility*, the subtle but catastrophic failure of brain cells and synapses that may eventually lead to institutionalization.

Normal aging should not be a signal to call it quits. There are a host of workarounds, and fortunately most of us are well equipped to apply them. Case in point:

"You are old," said the youth, "one would hardly suppose
That your eye was as steady as ever;
Yet you balanced an eel on the end of your nose –
What made you so awfully clever?"

I pity that eel, especially since last spring I began to experience not double, but *triple* vision. A cataract developing in my right eye began rendering a very subtle *two* of everything, and additionally that eye was no longer coordinating perfectly with its brother: triple whammy. While the problem was not serious enough to prevent me from driving, as a professional photographer, I found it particularly galling, and I began wondering whether I could still spot that most elusive of all objects: a white sailplane headed straight at me. The solution was pretty straight-forward: cataract surgery. Coupled with prismatic glasses, I now see better than ever, and once again enjoy the pleasure of acutely observing the world in all its detail, a pleasure that probably drove me to photography in the first place.

Another example: When I reached 80, rigging my glider began drawing away energy that properly should be reserved for the cockpit, so I bought a wing dolly. Now preflight chores are easier and as a delightful bonus I'm no longer dependent on others to help rig my ship.

The physical problems of aging are apparent to most of us, and far easier to deal with than the more subtle mental eclipses. If the problem's obvious, we either correct it, or if that's not possible, stop flying. But in fact, age may confer certain advan-

tages over the more fledgling members of our flock. NATO found that pilots in their 40s had slower reaction times than pilots in their 20s, but the younger pilots had *twelve times the accident rate of their elders*. Judgment, experience, and the caution that grows from experience count for a lot in making it back home to a safe landing. Enjoy the bonus. Senescence is a different matter, and requires careful evaluation. A heart condition may not prevent one from flying, but an airborne heart attack could not only launch a personal journey to the twilight zone, but might easily endanger others as well. Serious health problems should be taken seriously, and always in consultation with a doctor. That's not necessarily as terminal as it may seem. Often lapses of memory, judgment, or coordination may result from an underlying physical condition that is correctable. See your doctor.

But now we come to senility, the onset of which may not be apparent to its unlucky recipient since senility is characterized by a failure of judgment, including the judgment to recognize failure. Even though it may affect only ten percent of us, senility issues are surely at the core of any discussion about aging: how to recognize it and how to deal with it. But since (hopefully) I have no personal experience with the syndrome, I will defer to the insightful notes of Dr. Daniel Johnson, who has thought wisely and compassionately about the subject, and dealt with it in many of his patients.

Some of his notes are accompanied by slides at tinyurl.com/OldPilots. There, Dr. Dan suggests, the signs of on-setting senility can be subtle in the extreme. We all make mistakes, but persons approaching senility tend to make uncharacteristic mistakes. Is that normally careful and methodical pilot missing signals on the line? Having to be reminded about spoilers or canopy locks? Announcing the wrong runway prior to landing, or failing to announce at all? The problem of course is that any of us can fall victim to these lapses, so jumping to a premature diagnosis of senility could be embarrassing, harmful, and most importantly, incorrect. Better, I think, to defer judgment and compassionately observe. If senility is truly an issue, it will announce itself with time.

But what if the time for doubt has passed and our sometimes dangerous sport is clearly becoming more dangerous for a fellow pilot? I believe any one of us who recognizes such a situation has a clear responsibility to take action. But *how*? Dr. Johnson suggests an indirect, compassionate approach. Begin that most difficult of all conversations by mentioning the failures of aging that you've observed in yourself. Exaggerate if necessary. Leave space for your friend to echo your observations with some of his own. The echoing is important because it may lead to him reflecting on personal experience. At that point, you might begin asking some gentle probing questions: "Do you sometimes find yourself wondering why you ever made a certain decision? Do you sometimes find that it's hard to hold all the threads that go into a decision? Do your thoughts tend to fray or scatter? Is it sometimes hard to hold them together?"

In an ideal world, such a discussion

will lead your friend to a recognition that it is time for him to quit. But if it doesn't, now may be the time for more aggressive measures. Dr. Dan suggests the following:

If the pilot is in a club, it's best to take all actions by assembling a group of members that the patient likes and respects, and have a group discussion: ask the patient regarding his own concerns about his flying. Give him a chance again to take himself down. Then present observations of behavior that have been concerning to individuals in the club, especially including incidents, without drawing conclusions. Give him another chance to draw his own conclusions. Only if this doesn't get the desired result, then present him with a fait accompli.

I've noticed that sins of physical indulgence typically begin to catch up with us in our 60s and 70s. That's when smoking, overeating, or a sedentary life style begins to overcome the youthful energy reserves that can mask such problems at an earlier age. I'm probably in better physical shape than most guys my age. I don't smoke and I've never been overweight. I work out two or three times a week at a health club, and fill in most other days with four miles of rollerblading. Probably most important, I continue looking for fresh mental workouts. Right now I'm learning to play the double bass, studying with a good teacher, and playing in a small orchestra.

My 84 *feels* younger to me than the 84 I *see* in many other people, and recent research shows that physical fitness, particularly cardiovascular fitness, can lead to significantly increased longevity, and presumably a clearer head for finding those thermals. I recently discovered a fascinating website that will estimate one's fitness age (as opposed to chronological age), based on a series of questions and an algorithm developed by researchers who measured the fitness of 5,000 Norwegian adults. What's my fitness age? According to the study, it's 60. Try it for yourself at www.worldfitnesslevel.org.

Is there such a thing as stick-and-rudder fitness? I believe there may be, and I've come to feel that safety suggests us older guys should fly *more*, not less than we once did, just to keep those elderly synapses cooking. Recently I've begun performing minor aerobatics at the end of a flight when I've got spare altitude and feel fresh enough for it. A series of wing-overs and sixty degree banked circles are fun, get my blood churning, and probably help my glider chops as well.

Aging probably has as much to do with mental attitude as with physical failings. My mother in her later years was an example for me on how to age. She never gave in to her physical failings. At well over 100 she would get up each morning, hold on to the door jambs of her room, and run in place 100 steps. She survived colon cancer at 90, a heart attack at 101, and a broken hip at 103. When she could no longer weave, spin, sew, knit, or design tapestries, her major preoccupations, she turned to reading, and when her eyes failed, I bought her a television device that enlarges book pages, and she mastered that technology and continued reading. She died peacefully in her sleep and in full possession of her mental facilities five days after her 107th birthday.

I've heard many guys my age complain, "Aging sucks!" But for myself, I prefer to think of it as just another of life's adventures. Like my mom, I hope I'll always find new ways to adapt to the challenges of age. It's possible, for example, that my asthmatic lungs will no longer allow me to ski downhill, and in gliders I now turn on oxygen before takeoff in order to remain clear headed throughout the flight. And when I reach an age where "PIC" should become an empty column in my log book, I may buy a two-place ship and convince my soaring son to continue searching the skies with his dad. There's always more to do.

Anyway, there's still a kick or two left in me.

"I have answered three questions, and that is enough,"
Said his father; "don't give yourself airs!
Do you think I can listen all day to such stuff?
Be off, or I'll kick you down stairs!"

About the author: *Matt Herron first observed a village glider operation during his 1956 honeymoon in Switzerland. He's wanted to fly gliders ever since, but meanwhile he crossed the Atlantic in a small sailboat with his family and spent a year cruising the West Coast of Africa. In the 60's he photographed the civil rights revolution in the South for major US picture magazines. In the 70's he was bridge officer, navigator, and photographer for the first two Greenpeace anti-whaling voyages. Today he flies an LS-6, mentors cross country pilots, and competes against his son in regional contests.*