

*Viva the Vital*  
October 22, 2009

## **We Have Seen The Future And It Is Old**

By Matt Thornhill

Have you seen the advertising campaign for Dos Equis beer featuring “The Most Interesting Man in the World?” Each commercial depicts exploits from the “interesting man’s” past, or he offers insight on a particular topic. For example, on the topic of “Life” he says, “It is never too early to start beefing up your obituary.”

What we find especially interesting is that the unnamed character is an older man. In fact, he is played by a long-time character actor named Jonathan Goldsmith.

Goldsmith is 71 years old. And he is cool.

Welcome to a new age in American culture where being “old” is cool. It will be cool pretty much from now on. The reason is simple: the cool people have gotten older and plan on remaining cool.

Sure, we’ve had cool older people before – even before the idea of “cool” existed. Long ago Mark Twain or Thomas Edison or Albert Einstein or Georgia O’Keefe were cool. More recently it has been Sean Connery or Maya Angelou or Paul Newman or Sophia Loren.

We live in an America now where one out of every three people exhaling carbon dioxide is age 50 or older. Have you looked around recently? It is hard to miss the AARP-eligible candidates. Thanks to the very large Boomer generation reaching age 50 (only five more years to go until all Boomers are 50 and older), and the impact modern medicine has had on longevity, we live in a much older country than has ever existed before.

That means “old” is in everyone’s future.

The next generation of cool older people are already here, making an impact on our society and culture. There’s no way you could have convinced anyone in 1986 that the Rolling Stones, then in their early 40’s, would be the headline act at the 2006 Super Bowl halftime show. You would have heard great skepticism that Keith Richards would even see 1987, much less still be kicking it in 2006. Yet, there they were, all four of the Rolling Stones jukin’ and jivin’ in front of millions at age 62. Cool.

A blockbuster movie last year was *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, starring 65-year-old Harrison Ford. My then nine-year-old son said, “Dad, that Indy guy is so cool.” Cool? At 65? Yes, indeed.

Even before his most recent news-making incident with blackmail and sexual dalliances, 62-year-old David Letterman was already far ahead of 46-year-old Conan O'Brien in terms of TV households and viewers, even among younger adults, according to Nielsen data. Apparently old sarcastic wise-mouths are cooler.

The good news is that this acceptance of "old" as "cool" will continue as more and more cultural icons continue to grow older and remain cool -- Bruce Springsteen, age 60, did six shows at Giant Stadium earlier this month as part of over 80 live shows in 2009. He's so cool his band is still hot.

The better news is that after "cool" comes something even more desirable for those ever-growing-older Boomers: the mantle of wisdom. It comes naturally with age, usually being bestowed on those over 80 or so. When millions upon millions of Boomers accumulate wisdom to spare, it will become a trait valued by all generations.

The trick, quite honestly, is how do we get from here to there? How do we evolve from "cool" to "wisdom?" Fortunately for Boomers, there is time to figure it out. More importantly, there is time to let our actions make the transition for us. Moving beyond cool to wisdom isn't something we can only talk about. We will have to do it.

To that end, it is easy to predict a new era of contributions from older Boomers who seek to make the world a better place before they leave it. The contributions will go far beyond the short-sighted viewfinder of popular culture into things that really matter -- social contracts between the haves and the have nots; balancing our needs with the environment; educating our youth; caring for the health of others; pushing science forward; and who knows what else.

As we accomplish these goals we will forever transform the role of older people in America. We will be seen as assets -- heroic, wise, visionary, inspirational. And perhaps that will be our greatest achievement.

We will have made it not just cool to grow older; we will have made it meaningful.