

SANIBEL SHELL SHOCKED

Shooting the Breeze with my Younger Self
By Art Stevens

My thirty-year-old self showed up the other day to ask me, his older self, for advice.

He showed up in my mirror as I was shaving. I had to blink a few times to make sure I wasn't still asleep. The image in the mirror had my features but with considerably more hair and fewer wrinkles. He stared just as hard at me as I did at him. "So that's what I'll look like when I'm your age," he said.

I was about to ask my younger self where did the time go but I bit my tongue. I didn't want to utter trite clichés which would have the effect of disappointing my younger self if he thought that this was the best his older self could do with the passage of years.

So his first question was how the Yankees did during the past number of years. I told him that I couldn't answer questions that told him the future, which he needed to find out for himself as he grew older. My younger self seemed a bit miffed by my response.

"But there are things I want to know. Can't you even give me a hint? Will I do well professionally?" he asked.

"Is there any doubt in your mind?" I fired back.

"Yes, I'm confident I will do well, but I'd like to hear it from the horse's mouth," he said.

"Don't call me a horse," I said.

"Since when did you get so literal?" he asked. "Come on; give me a hint of things to come. Will I marry well?"

I thought about my lovely wife and the longevity of our marriage. "When you're ready, you'll know," I responded.

"What will the world be like at your age?" he tried again.

"The more things change, the more they stay the same," I blurted out not knowing what else to say and not willing to divulge information that could alter his life – and mine.

"You're not being very helpful," he said. "Here I have this unprecedented opportunity to learn about my life from my older self and you're being totally evasive. If you're not willing to share then what's the point of my even talking to you?"

Was this what I was like when I was thirty I thought? Was I this edgy? But what insights could I share with him that wouldn't cause him to make wholesale changes in his life that could indeed affect who I am today?

This was going to be more difficult than I thought.

My younger self jumped in first. He said: "I know you can't tell me what my future is going to be like because that is something I need to find out for myself. But seeing that you're somewhat older than I am now I can only assume that I will have a reasonably longer life. Is that a safe assumption?"

I pondered this and answered very carefully. "Your assumption is correct. You can conclude that you will have an opportunity to live a full life. But what will happen to your life between your age and mine is something you need to find out for yourself."

He pouted in the manner that truly reminded me of me. After all, he was me. I could understand his wanting to know things that would help him live a richer, fuller life. But at thirty, I hadn't even met my wife to be and I certainly couldn't tell him about her now. But could I tell him anything that could alter the actual course of his life? If I did, would I still be standing here at a mirror looking at my younger self? I said "I'm not a philosopher but whatever happens to you just know that it's one moment at a time. Enjoy everything – the good times, the sad times, and there will always be some of both. But just being alive is the one constant you have going for you. You'll be alive for a number of years. You can already conclude that just by looking at me through this mirror. And if you know this you will know more than almost every person on earth. This is the only gift I can give to you today and the one unalterable fact that can't be changed, no matter what."

My thirty-year-old self studied me for a long time. At long last he said "Thank you for that. It's comforting to know that I will at least reach your present age. But one day, when I am your age, I hope that I can look in the mirror again, just as we are doing now, and see yet an even older version of myself. You may still have a long ways to go and your older self can give you the same assurances you're giving me today."

And then the mirror got fogged up and my younger self was gone. But what he had said to me lingered. Imagine getting up one morning, looking in the mirror and seeing yet an even older version of myself. On second thought, I just might skip shaving that morning.