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Here are a few last minutes with another Andy Rooney

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I've found as I've gotten older that I don't like more things than I didn't like when I was younger. This makes me sad. But I realize that my happiness back then depended on keeping quiet about a lot more things than I do now.

The world may not be worse, but it certainly has become more discouraging. I think I've come down with malaise.

I'm about as cranky today as I was in 1941 when the Army drafted me against my better judgment. In those days, of course, I peddled grumpiness as mysterious sex appeal. Now, I pass it off as charisma. It's the old wine in an even older bottle.

Everything around me has gone down the tubes. Except for one thing.

For reasons that elude me, I've made a handsome living for more than 30 years by muttering for a few minutes on Sunday night about the small annoyances and nagging injustices of daily life.

CBS pays me an indefensible amount of money for my antisocial kvetches. This has allowed me to go up the tubes, fast and far.

I always assumed that one of the idiots who run this network would get wise sooner or later, but none have. This is what happens when idiots are paid more than they're worth and think they're smart.

Take words. Research tells us that the working vocabulary of our young people is shrinking. By 2015, most of America's youth will be getting by with no more than...really, awesome and like.

To the credit of our youth, two of these three buggers contain more than one syllable.

A three-word language would be awesome in the older sense of the word. But I'm like really "Whoa!" to that.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not against change, or even young people that much. I'm just against change that I don't like.

Everywhere I look, standards are falling, and falling is our new standard. (This is the kind of literary nimbleness I've been choreographing for years.)

When I was a kid in Albany, N.Y., I ate oatmeal for breakfast every morning. Oatmeal is oat groats. Did I complain? You bet. Nothing changed. Every morning...porridge.

I still eat porridge every morning. I hate it just as much. But it does get my day off on the wrong foot, which is what I want to do. I think porridge should be compulsory for every kid under 60.

I'm so old that I can remember standing under a spreading chestnut tree where a village smithy might have stood when he wasn't up at the saloon.

The blacksmith that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow celebrated was Dexter Pratt who had his shop in Cambridge, Mass.

When the town fathers widened Brattle Street in 1876, “progress” felled this legendary tree. The town and its children had an armchair made for Longfellow from it. Pratt deserved a chair more than Longfellow.

I’ve seen this chair. It has an unyielding, carved back that would give you a crick if you sat in it for more than five minutes.

It’s in the Longfellow Museum where no one is allowed to sit in it. If you can’t sit in a chair, what good is it? And if a chair is no good for sitting, why make it in the first place?

Longfellow should have told them to shove that chair. I would have. You can’t shut *me* up by giving me a present that makes me uncomfortable.

No one writes corny poetry today like these Longfellow lines:

The smith, a mighty man is he,
With large and sinewy hands;

...his brow is wet with honest sweat,
He earns whate’er her can,
And looks the whole world in the face,
For he owes not any man.

My goodness! Who among us can look even half the world in the face these days? We’re all in debt up to our wazoos.

No one can understand modern poetry. It’s as dense as a brick and concerns itself with fly specks. Poets don’t even try to rhyme anymore. Longfellow would be laughed out of freshman poetry class for being a dork. I’m not whining. I’m telling the truth.

Take food packages.

A cereal box is twice as large as the bagged cereal inside, and that bag usually contains less than a full pound. They get you to pay for something you think is there, but isn’t.

Same with lumber. 2x4s aren’t two inches thick by four inches in width. They’re a half-inch smaller on both dimensions. That’s 35 percent less than what they used to be. You don’t see this advertised very often.

Same with newspapers. Smaller page size; fewer pages.

We accept without question fake this and faux that. Downsize is the new normal.

Take CBS News... Please!

We used to be pretty good, but now we’re in the entertainment business and scared of our memories. Most of the female reporters talk a mile a minute and wear skirts so short that they’d make a hooker blush. I can never remember anything they say, for both reasons. All the males have big hair. Talk shows now pass for news. Everyone yells at the same time. Neither knowledge nor democracy can be based on interrupting.

Money.

Everything comes down to money. I like money as much as the next guy. But everything ought to come down to something more than money. When I figure out what that is, I’ll do my final piece for “60 Minutes.” Like honest.

Here are the last lines of Longfellow’s hokey homage to the village smithy:

Toiling, -- rejoicing -- sorrowing,
Onward through life he goes;
Each morning sees some task begin,
Each evening sees it close;
Something attempted, something done,
Has earned a night's repose.

Thanks! Thanks, to thee, my worthy friend,
For the lesson thou has taught!
Thus at the flaming forge of life
Our fortunes must be wrought;
Thus on its sounding anvil shaped
Each burning deed and thought.

I've written a couple of thousand complaints about the "flaming forge of life," and not one has ever done a bit of good. Nonetheless, I've been paid well—my fortune has been nicely wrought. I'm famous. People send me stuff I don't want.

But when all has been said and done, the walnut table I made will last longer in deed and thought than any lesson I have given.

Under the vanished chestnut tree,
The old wordsmithy stood.
The only thing he did of value
Was make his desk of wood.

I've tried to correct what's wrong in the world. But my two cents were never enough. That's why I hate pennies.

I don't want to go, but I don't want to stay either.

I'll probably come out of retirement a couple of times like a punchy old boxer who thinks he can still fight.

Well, I'm glad that you put up with me this long. I'm also glad I didn't get to know you better. If you knew me better, you would have killed my show in the 70s.

I hate being stopped on the street, but 'tis better to have been stopped and fussed than never to have been stopped at all.

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