

What a Falling Prof. Was There

by Theodore Dalrymple (June 2014)

Last night I could not sleep: the clocks had gone forward (or back, I always find it difficult to remember which) and I had drunk a bit too much earlier in the evening. I don't know why, but I suddenly had the idea to occupy my sleeplessness by looking up on the internet some of the distinguished doctors I had known as a student and young man. Perhaps this strange impulse came to my mind because recently, in my e-mail, I have received, both from France and from England, invitations to insure myself against funeral costs. Do the advertisers know something about me that I do not know myself? They cannot have got it from my doctor because I never go to my doctor. Perhaps they are working from general principles, namely that people of my age have accelerating death rates after years of declining ones. It is therefore nothing personal. But it is clear that advertisers of whom I have never heard know my date of birth, which is creepy enough by itself. (What else do they know about me?) At any rate, I will soon be going the way of those distinguished doctors I looked up, most of whom were dead; and I was seized by nostalgia.

On the internet one thing leads to another and I ended up looking also for my student contemporaries with whom I had since lost touch. The internet acts on sleep rather as amphetamines do, that is to say it prevents it. I found myself looking for hours.

The first thing I noticed was how misleading an impression in general the internet gave of the relative distinction of my own and the previous generation. The previous generation lived before the internet era so that only scraps of information about it were to be found on it; whereas there were often entire screeds about my contemporaries who seem to do nothing without an electronic record of it appearing. Their lives had become public in a way that those of the preceding generation had never been. And yet I cannot rid my mind of my belief that the previous generation had been composed of worthier men, men of deeper character, more distinguished in their distinction, than our own. We are shallow by comparison with them; spoilt in childhood, we have grown up pygmies. The only compensation for this melancholy thought is that the next generation will be even worse.

I have of course considered the possibility that the reason the previous generation appears to me so much more distinguished than my own is that I know my own generation better; as no man

is a hero to his valet, so no generation seems distinguished to those who shared its youth. You can think really highly only of those about whom you know little. I knew the previous generation only by its accomplishments, not by its *bêtises*