

LIFE *begin*
at FORT

WALTER B. PITKIN

LIFE BEGINS AT FORTY

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Preface

THIS little book has been written by request. Many people who have attended lectures I have given on the subject have asked that the material be brought together. So here it is.

In the six years that have elapsed since I first gave serious attention to the difficult problem of adult reorientation, the scenes have shifted considerably, and the colors have changed. Not a few earlier ideas had to be surrendered, while wholly new thoughts forced themselves into the texture. Nevertheless the broader pattern seems still intact and unfaded. I hope it will stand up under the wear and tear of life in the new age we now enter.

WALTER B. PITKIN.

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LIFE BEGINS AT
FORTY

Chapter I

WE ENTER, ENVYING

YOU who are crossing forty may not know it, but you are the luckiest generation ever. The advantages you are about to enjoy will soon be recited, with a sincere undertone of envy. The whole world has been remodeled for your greater glory. Ancient philosophies and rituals are being demolished to clear the ground for whatever you choose to erect upon their sites. Every day brings forth some new thing that adds to the joy of life after forty. Work becomes easy and brief. Play grows richer and longer. Leisure lengthens. Life's afternoon is brighter, warmer, fuller of song; and long before the shadows stretch, every fruit grows ripe.

Best of all, though, is your inner deliverance. A better age has delivered you from the Conviction of Incompetence, that curse of the middle years. The men of old believed that life was ended at forty, and for them, alas, it often was. So, as the thirties slipped by, their spirits flagged; they grew disconsolate, embittered, hard; and they looked upon the young with an

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envy that built a wall of hate between the generations. But this wall is crumbling under the blasts of a new trumpet. Year by year the line between youth and age thins and fades. Already the patriarchal family has vanished. Parents and children are simply human beings of the same blood under one roof; they are not hostile clans. Grandfather dances a jig at little granddaughter's birthday.

The ancient clash of interests is succeeded by a division of labor. For youth the tasks of youth; for age the tasks of age. And for every man his own life, to be ordered and adorned as he will. Man is no longer slave to man; but all men pull together to enslave atoms and molecules. Where of old the growing boy had to drudge his years away, now an engine turns the trick. The Machine Age emancipates muscle first, then mind also; and, as we shall try to show, makes it possible for all men to be men as long as they live.

High excitements lie ahead of you now turning forty. The race has nibbled the fruits of wisdom and found them both sweet and sustaining. Thus far it has turned to account almost nothing of its inventions and discoveries. The world is still to be civilized; and, in your day, this supreme process will begin. Were you to be no more than idle spectators, all other ages, past and future,

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would envy you. But you will be more than that: you will eat the meat of giants and overtop all your ancestors. You will soon look through a 200-inch telescope and scan the back yards of the moon as if they were at the bottom of a little hill. You will remodel your frames and your temperaments with cunningly concocted foods and pills. You will have little cause to worry over the price of clothes and rent. Or, if you do not live to see such wonders, you will at least behold them drawing near—which, of itself, will be a wonder.

You will, in a subtle fashion, be even luckier than your descendants; for they will be born in civilization and find all its splendors commonplace. But you, who have known the barbarians and have been choked by the stench of diseased millions and have watched fifty million wretches die in a dirty brawl called war, under the lead of gangsters, will taste the full, tingling bouquet of a wine which, made of a million years of human vintage, is about to be tapped for the first time.

Yes, you are the luckiest of all. Life begins at forty—now more richly than ever before, and perhaps as richly as ever again.

Life Begins at Forty

Life begins at forty.

This is the revolutionary outcome of our New Era. This is the supreme reward of the Machine

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Age, the richest blessing of science. Day before yesterday it wasn't even a dream. Yesterday it was a silly lie. Today it is half a truth. Tomorrow it will be an axiom.

At what did the Minds behind the Machine Age aim? The saving of labor. That's agreed, isn't it? Every achievement of physicists, chemists, inventors, and engineers since Eli Whitney made the first cotton gin has lightened the day's work of some toiler. Thereby they sped up production, cut the cost of manufacture, and, quite incidentally, shortened the hours of toil so that men had more leisure.

Before the Machine Age, men wore out at forty. When the World War broke out, the British found their recruits from mine and mill town "already ageing at thirty-five. Most of the industrial classes around Manchester were, for military purposes, old men at 38 . . . The list of their disabilities was appalling." So testifies the chairman of a medical board in England of 1915. Of the world's two billion odd souls, more than a billion still work themselves into early graves. The peasant, the sailor, the dock worker, the frontiersman and the coolie die the youngest, for the Machine has aided them the least of all. But in all the more progressive factory centers life grows easier—in spite of depressions and wars.

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Thanks to hard times, industries are rapidly adopting the five-day week and the six-hour day. We shall never go back to the old order; for we shall make all the world needs and can buy on this new schedule of leisure. A man of fifty can now handle five hundred acres of plowland with much less strain and vastly more profit than a pioneer of 1840, his wife, and their seventeen children could handle a hundred acres. Give our modern middle-aged American a good tractor with proper gang plows, harrows, drills, and combines, and he will work ten or twelve acres a day with hardly more effort than he drives his automobile. The pioneer, driving his heaviest team, turned over, at best, two acres of soil a day; and when the sun set, he had walked nearly fifteen miles up and down the heavy furrows. Give her the best milking machines and electricity in her home, and a woman of fifty can handle ten times as many dairy cows as any husky peasant wench astraddle of a milking stool.

Thanks to Super-Power and the Machine, housework is becoming a joke; so, as this happens, men and women alike turn from the ancient task of *making a living* to the strange new task of *living*. And here we arrive at the Revolution.

For the past million years 99.999 per cent of all who have been born have spent most of

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their time and energy in making a living. Only the South Sea Islanders, the hoboes, and the inmates of asylums (a few years ago we would have included the rich here) have risen triumphantly above this dire necessity. Is it to be marveled at, then, that so few of us know how to live? Or that many of us have been fooled into thinking that we find the largest free outlet for our personalities in our jobs? This is one of the Million American Myths. Any man small enough to be absorbed by the activities of pounding a linotype machine or entering bank deposits in a ledger or selling overalls to country grocers or greasing automobiles in a garage or writing advertisements for talcum powder is much too tiny to attempt reading these pages. Possibly one job in 500 contains within its own routine variety, difficulty, and suggestiveness enough to stimulate both the body and mind of the worker. The 499 other jobs compel their workers to look beyond the scene of toil for a chance to live. And, as there is less and less work to perform, this compulsion grows acute today. It is the central crisis of culture.

What hope of coming through it safely? I said, a moment ago, that at this particular moment in our history it is half a truth that life begins at forty. Money and education and native ability combine variously to make it so.

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Glance at incomes, and you will see how. Would a worker make something of his life outside of his job? Then he must have a little money over and above bald necessities. Not much, to be sure. But surely a thin margin. How fares it with us today? Who has this margin? Who lacks it?

Life begins long before forty for some 700,000 Americans born rich enough to do nearly as they please. It begins around forty for some 3,000,000 more whose individual incomes and savings rise through early maturity to something better than \$2,000. And it might easily begin at forty for another 12,000,000 or 14,000,000, if these were to organize their affairs to that end from youth onward.

For the remaining one hundred and ten million Americans, though, can life ever begin? As matters stand now, they spend their days grubbing away for bread and butter; now and then they take a brief vacation which is little more than a waking sleep. Whether many of them might, through better schooling, better health, and better drill in their vocations, advance to intelligent leisure and fruitful days is a controversial question. Some thinkers are sure that no substantial gains are possible, inasmuch as this herd is constitutionally stupid. Others challenge this depressing opinion; they

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maintain that the manifest dullness of these masses has been caused by bad food, by overwork, by uncongenial toil, by premature marriage, by alcohol and tobacco, by epidemics, by climate, and by other external forces that weaken mind and body. Stamp out these forces, so they reason, and most of these millions will grow brighter, livelier, abler in their jobs, thriftier, and saner in managing themselves; hence life will begin at forty for them, too.

I incline to agree, in the main, with this second view. I shall argue that many millions of our citizens can get much more out of their fourth, fifth, and sixth decades of life than out of any of the first, simply by learning how to live and how to make the most of opportunities within reach. Further I shall maintain that the more fortunate millions in the upper income classes can double or treble their enjoyment merely by mastering a modern philosophy of life.

Chapter II

YOUTH IN THE RED

NOT once have I sighed for childhood and youth again. Not that I have reason to flee and forget those early years. They were, in their fashion, happy and exciting. No sorrow fell across them, nor any notable defeat. But living has always been forward. What is done is done, for better or for worse. There is no recall. There can be no repeating. In the Everlasting Now, all yesterdays and all tomorrows are only items within a pulsating immediacy. Hence I cannot feel as Santayana in his sonnet:

Such is youth;
Till from that summer's trance we awake, to find
Despair before us, vanity behind.

Nor can I soberly imagine myself in gloom over tomorrow simply because I have fewer years to live than when I was sixteen. Life after forty has been much more exciting and profitable than before forty. For each loss there has been a greater gain. Nor are these gains fictions of a rationalizer. They can be named and pointed out.

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From birth to seventeen we are busy growing up. This is a period of pleasant confusion and tingling mysteries; for the weak and the coddled it is also a terribly dangerous period of irresponsibility, during which they lean on parents and other elders for support and management. The weakling loves this too much; and it becomes his ruin. The strong rebel against it and somehow escape. But for weak and strong alike these years are not living in any rich sense; they are animality.

Nobody under seventeen ever knows anything, ever has a clear thought on any important subject, ever attains an important skill except perhaps in music, ever gains full control of wild emotions, ever converses interestingly, or ever does anything in the way of living as a mature person. In saying this, I utter the banal and the axiomatic, of course. Everything in babe, child, and adolescent changes much too fast to acquire pattern or power.

From seventeen to twenty-two or thereabouts we learn the social life, in business no less than in pleasure; and most of us marry and settle down at the close of this period. Girls usually wed around twenty-two, youths at twenty-four in our country. Then all start to make a living; and ninety-five out of every hundred never turn from this devastating task. The toil of