

Summer 2011

Forever Young

By

Edward F. Ansello, Ph.D.

Bob Dylan turned 70 years old this spring. Many older Americans and quite a few Baby Boomers will identify Dylan with their youth. During the 1960s he wrote, among other things, the anthems that seemed to capture, if not advance, the generational divide between younger and older. His songs were noteworthy for inventive but straightforward lyrics, whether signaling the end of a personal relationship (*It Ain't Me, Babe*) or summing the costs of war (*Blowin' in the Wind*). I suspect that his reaching age 70 has prompted not a little bit of realization among many that our personal times are a-changing.

I remember vividly seeing Dylan at the Newport (Rhode Island) Folk Festivals two consecutive summers. The festival was held in an old baseball park in the city, a small, uninviting structure of high wooden walls painted green and topped with wire. I was there the legendary night when Dylan "went electric" and many in the crowd booed his apparent abandonment of the Holy Grail of folk music, the acoustic guitar. Revisionists since then have argued that the crowd really was angry at the emcee Peter Yarrow or at the brevity of Dylan's music set; but people around me down the sidelines along the first base side yelled insults at Dylan that are not printable. The Newport police had instituted a policy that summer forbidding overnight sleeping on the beach and many in the crowd consequently were tired and irritable, but the booing and anger were real.

Nonetheless, for many Bob Dylan's music and messages endured for years thereafter, through the Vietnam War era and beyond, as integral parts of the times we had lived through. Gerontologists theorize that each of us is shaped by the influences of cohort (birth group) and historical time. If there's a oneness of who we were and who we are, if we are one thing, our past and present combined, then Dylan's music is in many of us.

Two of Dylan's best known pieces, *Like a Rolling Stone* and *The Times They Are A-Changing* epitomized the restless, alienated spirit of so many of the young. Other songs captured the bitterness or sweet regret of failed relationships, as in *Positively 4th Street* ("You got a lotta nerve to say you are my friend") and *Just Like A Woman*. At the time he seemed at once to write for a generation and for the individual listener. Like the Modernist Movement in poetry (T.S. Eliot, Ford Madox Ford, D.H. Lawrence), Dylan created images to which each listener brought a personal meaning.

"Forever Young" is the most popular song on a later album, his 1974 *Planet Waves*, a song since covered by several artists. Dylan wrote it for his children, having one step-daughter and three sons and a daughter of his own at the time. The writer of protest songs penned a heartfelt wish for his children, a wish any parent can identify with. It's also a wish that endures across the ages and across the life course. It is as meaningful in later life as at its beginning.

May God bless and keep you always,
May your wishes all come true,
May you always do for others
And let others do for you.
May you build a ladder to the stars
And climb on every rung,
May you stay forever young,
Forever young, forever young,
May you stay forever young.

May you grow up to be righteous,
May you grow up to be true,
May you always know the truth
And see the lights surrounding you.
May you always be courageous,
Stand upright and be strong,
May you stay forever young,
Forever young, forever young,
May you stay forever young.

May your hands always be busy,
May your feet always be swift,
May you have a strong foundation
When the winds of changes shift.
May your heart always be joyful,
May your song always be sung,
May you stay forever young,
Forever young, forever young,
May you stay forever young.

Forever Young is not a paean to age denial. Its message is neither age- nor time-limited. Rather, it seems to me to invoke virtues or characteristics that never grow old: charity to others, acceptance of kindness, hope, righteousness, courage, fortitude, industriousness, and joy.

Dylan was encouraging his children to aspire to goodness in what lay ahead. To be sure, the issues being faced are quite different in the early years than later in life. But the principles Dylan so simply advanced in *Forever Young* pertain even so. Facing these issues with courage remains an essential trait in a meaningful life. For instance, being courageous may mean, at any point in life, fighting or accepting a dire health diagnosis, if each involves honest self-examination and appraisal of effects on others. Being true to oneself really does not have an expiration date, nor is joy the property of any age group. But in fairness, these virtues do seem to become harder to recapture at times.

"When the winds of changes shift" epitomizes life, doesn't it? Just when one seems to be in a comfortable routine, things change. No matter when in the life course, things change.

When this happens, Dylan wished a strong foundation to face these winds. Relationships, faith, a moral compass.

In *Forever Young* Dylan spoke encouragingly to the hearts of his children, for sometimes, early in life we are outsiders thought too young to be valuable in making important decisions. Sometimes in later life we are thought too old to do the same. From this perspective, Dylan's lyrics resonate for those of us later in life.

Dylan is still performing and has recently sold out venues around the world. His audiences are said to range the life course. He is no golden-throated troubadour, but his 70th birthday is a good time to recognize that some messages are timeless.