

Emanuel and Matisse: Two Distinct Perspectives on Aging

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After reading Ezekiel J. Emanuel's "Why I Hope to Die at 75" in *The Atlantic* (October 2014), I could not help but think about how the few and privileged have countless opportunities to fulfill their lifetime goals and aspirations, often left with a *choice* as to when and how they may end their life. Emanuel is only able to feel that living too long is a loss or that by 75 his life will be complete because he has been lucky enough to be afforded a choice. For him it's easy to see old age simply as a time where we are deprived of creativity and intelligence – to say that what comes after ultimately amounts to nothing is indicative of the assumption that everyone has access to the same resources and social capital.

In reality, most people are left with little to no *choice* in rapidly navigating through their age in order to fulfill their destiny. Although Emanuel may feel that he would prefer to live until age 75, most people do not have the privilege to decide because of racial, wealth, gender, class, economic, educational, and religious inequalities. Life simply gets in the way. They have families to feed and bills to pay. Unfortunately for most, the achievements in which Emanuel references in his own life's journey are few and far between. It can take a lifetime to achieve a goal for people without access to opportunity, despite hard work and effort.

Emanuel's perspective on aging is also troubling because life can and should be fulfilling at every stage. His perspective may be unfairly influenced by medicine's several failures, failures he has witnessed firsthand in the hospital. However, after learning about the life and art of Henri Matisse I found a different perspective on aging. In Matisse's later life it's easy to see that not all is right with Emanuel's stance.

Henri Matisse is considered by many art critics as one of the greatest visual artists of his generation. He was an innovator, most famous for the "cut-outs" he created later in life that highlighted the array and spectrum of life's ups and downs. Matisse's inspiration for these pieces came during the 1940s when his own life was turned upside down. He was diagnosed with abdominal cancer and then left wheelchair-bound after his operation. He used this newfound physical challenge as a means to re-discover his love for cut-outs.

As his surgery had left him debilitated, bound to his wheel chair and bed, painting and sculpture became more of a physical challenge. So, Matisse, ever so the creative genius, sought to reinvent himself by turning to cut-outs. Cut-outs are created by painting paper and cutting them into figurative forms before pasting or nailing the pieces on paper, canvas, or another palette. Ultimately, cut-outs were a simple and sensible solution: sheets of paper paint-washed by assistants, large sturdy scissors, and plain tailor pins were far more manageable materials and tools. Yet, what he managed to create was just as elaborate and beautiful as any of his prior work. For a man invigorated by the process of making art for art's sake cut-outs became a kind of physical therapy as well as his trademark until his death at 84 in November of 1954.

The exhibition *Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs*, which ran at the Modern Museum of Modern Art from October 12, 2014 till February 10, 2015, reflected Matisse's renewed interest in form and color, but most

strikingly, his commitment to art during his years as a seasoned forerunner and elder in the modern art movement. Most art critics believe Matisse's psychological relief at having survived mortal crises was the cause of the creative rush he went through in his later years. The legacy he left after passing continues to influence modern artists, its greatest takeaway that vigor and passion for art is ageless.

What is meant by a fulfilling life? What does such a life consist of? Does achievement have a time limit? I tend to see the life Matisse lived as my plausible frame of reference. Through his latest exhibition, Matisse moves us to think and explore without limit, no matter our age or status. He directly challenges Emanuel's belief that past 75 we lose our chance at creativity and success.

At the age of 40, my greatest desire is to light a flame of hope within myself so that my experiences, education, and talents can all be used in a meaningful way in order to transform society. It is my profound belief that we are never limited by who we are now or what others may perceive us to be. We are only limited by what we perceive of ourselves. For me, Matisse will always represent timeless, unlimited creativity, and beauty. The dignity he displayed, even at his seasoned age as a master artist, has reminded me that our best is yet to be.
