

**Essay 1- One is Never Too Old to be a Student**

**Chinese saying: 活到老, 学到老**

**Pronunciation: Huo Dao Lao, Xue Dao Lao**

**Translation: Living to Old Age and Learning to Old Age**

I was already past the Big Three-O when I arrived in Atlanta from China to study for my master's degree. I felt old.

There was, first, the widely accepted Confucius' teaching in China that "One should be established by 30," meaning that one should have finished education and established one's career, family, outlook on life, etc. by that age, even though the ancient philosopher might have meant it only for men. Then there was the fact in China that colleges and universities rarely had students or graduate students over 30. Of course the Chinese always had the saying "Living to old age and learning to old age," but that "learning" was not exactly school learning, certainly not learning as a full-time student.

So it was quite a new thing to do to go back to school after 30. Yet there I was, starting an academic program at a ripe age, not to say in a different country. The youthful undergraduates all over the campus, on bikes, on skateboards, didn't help the case.

After the program started, however, I came to know several members of the program who were mid-career professionals, married, and even with kids. The most unusual was E, an energetic and friendly fellow. Not only was he taking more courses than anybody else in the program, he was also teaching part-time on campus and running a business on the side as well. What was most amazing about E was that he was about 60 years old and was the father-in-law of another member in the program! I was stunned, pleasantly. Hey, this was "Living to old age and learning to old age," American style!" I told myself.

E impressed me further with his upbeat spirit through our conversations about the program, career, American society, etc., especially how he was having fun doing it all. There was not the slightest consideration of age.

Later on during the program, I came upon a television interview. The subject was a woman past 50. I do not remember her name, but I have never forgotten her words. She had just earned her law degree. The TV host asked why she had decided to go back to school and expected to earn a degree approaching 50. She said her family and friends had asked the same question. Her answer to them as well as the interviewer was the same: I am going to be 50 anyway no matter I get a degree or not. Why not with a degree?

Why not, indeed! What an extraordinary answer to age or learning at an older age?

I was truly moved by her story. I even felt a little ashamed of myself for feeling old as a student again after 30. But I definitely felt better and more confident about my studies afterwards.

Over the years, even long after I got my master's degree, I have been drawn to stories of "Living to old age and learning to old age" in America. Thousands of middle-aged men and women as well as senior citizens have gone back to school, to advance themselves, to change their careers, to pick up where they had left, to develop a new interest for their retirement years, etc.

The most inspiring story of older students had to be that of Mary Fasano. In 1997, at the age of 89, she became the oldest person to earn a bachelor's degree from Harvard.

Mary's education was interrupted when she was 14 years old. She had to work in a cotton mill to help her family, as the social as well as family tradition required of her. She promised herself, however, that one day she would go back to school. Years later when she was in her late 60s, with a successful diner business with her husband and their five children sent to college, she started working on her high school diploma. After earning it at age 71, she enrolled in Harvard and went on to work towards first an associate degree and then a bachelor's degree in liberal arts. 18 years of perseverance followed and paid off in the commencement season of 1997. Her whole family—5 children, 20 grandchildren and 18 great-grandchildren—joined to celebrate her achievement. "I am happy now," she said, "It is for my own satisfaction." I bet she was the happiest 89-year-old in the world that day!

Since then, two more ladies have broken Mary's record as well as the Guinness World Record: the 90-year-old Mozelle Richardson who received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Journalism from the University of Oklahoma in 2004; the 95-year-old Nola Ochs, earning a general studies degree with an emphasis on history from the Fort Hays Kansas State University in 2007.

In addition to these exceptional ladies who rendered us speechless, the trend-setting baby boomers have been turning "back to school" from a novelty to a fact of life. According to one AOL report, at the beginning of 2007, there were 80,000 baby boomers taking classes along with 18-year-olds. Experts say, baby boomers, already the most educated generation, desire to remain connected to the workforce and make intellectual contributions as they near retirement age, or for pure enjoyment. One 56-year-old successful business executive has been pursuing another degree: MBA. Why? She said she wanted to make herself a more valuable asset to her firm and her family.

In her and all those older students, I have seen not only shining examples of the Chinese saying "Living to old age and learning to old age" but also that of the English saying "One is as old as one feels."

With these examples, it seems odd that I even felt old being a graduate student after 30. With these examples, I doubt that anyone of us can ever have anything to say about being too old to learn or too old to be a student again.