Next to one’s birthday, the passing of the calendar year induces us to reflect on the march of time in our life. This is not a welcome subject for many—which is perhaps why a lot of people simply redefine old age virtually out of existence. When Americans were asked in 2009 what “being old” means, the most popular response was turning 85. Yet the average life span in the United States in 2022 was only 76. Apparently, then, the average American dies nine years before getting old.

The impulse to define old age as “older than I am now” is not surprising, given all the ways our culture worships youth—its beauty, vitality, and entrepreneurial energy—and offers us any number of options for spending time and money to stop or slow down the clock of aging. And as if the adulation of youth weren’t enough, the stigmatization of seniors is always at hand, through overt discrimination, ageist stereotyping, and crass “OK Boomer”—style contempt.

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