

November 1, 1993 (Vol. 9, no. 5)

Dear Colleague:

I hope you have been out enjoying the brilliant fall colors. How wonderfully they can lift the spirit with their warmth and verve! And yet the leaves are that way because they are losing "the green fuse of life"--they are dying. Of course, we know that, hence the touches of melancholy that occasionally break into our generally happy mood. Now, my question is, Why can't we consider human hair the way we consider leaves? That fine crop of brown or red hair on the young will, after middle age, turn into a brilliant display of silver and gold. So why, far from admiring these "fall colors" on the head, most people tint them back to the monotones of youth?

I guess one answer is, as Hannah Arendt puts it, "We humans are the only mortals in nature." We may believe in the cycles of life--in one fine crop of hair following another--but we also know, in the deepest part of our being, that the trajectory of own individual lives is linear: it begins with birth and ends in death. The silver and gold threads that appear in our hair are only too clear a reminder of where we stand on that trajectory.

Yet quite a few people are unwilling to let the curve of life follow its own graceful course. They kill themselves. Suicide is almost always a mistake--an intellectual error even more than a moral one. The error is to think that one no longer cares about what society has to offer. One does care. Society's grip holds to the very end. Consider the two famous bridges of the Bay Area in California--the Golden Gate and the Bay. Both were built around the 'thirties; both rise some 200 feet above the water. A potential suicide can kill himself as easily on the one as on the other. Yet, more than 700 had dived off the Golden Bay Bridge since it was built and only a fifth of that number did likewise off the Bay Bridge. Moreover, whereas several people had driven all the way across the Bay Bridge to jump off the Golden Gate, none had done so in the opposite direction.

Why? Status, Old Boy. You gotta do it with class. Bay Bridge is tainted by its proximity to unchic Oakland. What will the neighbors say? By the way, in Minneapolis, the prestigious place to jump off is Washington Bridge that joins the University's West and East Campuses. No other bridge in the city will do--not if you are a self-respecting faculty member.

Best wishes,

