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America is graying quickly, and serious lifestyle issues loom

By Liz Taylor
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We'll see a lot of changes in our society over the next three decades — amazing changes. For one, America's over-65 population will go from 12 percent to nearly 20 percent.

If that doesn't hit you hard, just imagine almost every fourth person on the bus, in the street and in the grocery store will be very gray, frail and wrinkled. And many of the other people you see will be older than we're used to because younger generations will be aging, too.

Over the next 30 years, more people will be living into their 90s and 100s. The boomers are at the head of the class — not because they're special (although they think they are), but because history has granted them an opportunity for unprecedented longevity. Healthier lifestyles and medical miracles that didn't exist even a decade ago will keep us alive longer than most of us dream. What brings this to mind is an e-mail I received from a reader recently. It starts benignly enough:

"My wife and I are in our mid-50s, living our lives and slowly preparing for retirement and eventual 'aging deliberately.' Like you, we have no children.

"My question is: What do we do with our many photo albums that we've made over the years? I admit this is a minor issue, more emotional than anything, but my wife and I have no relatives who will be interested in having them, and it depresses me to think of them being carted off to a landfill.

"I've heard of ritual burnings, and the cleansing and finality of fire appeals to me. But when to do it? I could see burning them, and then in a year thinking, 'Man, I wish I would have held onto them awhile longer!' Your thoughts?"

My first thought: This is like the people who write to Ann Landers asking which way the toilet paper should hang. Don't we have deeper issues to ponder?

Then the light bulb turned on. I've been thinking the very same thing about my photos, with the same apprehension. I bet no other generation in history worried about their photos. In the past, there were few photos and many children to pass them onto. Today we have huge numbers of photos, CDs, VCRs, home movies — you name whatever new invention is on the way — and many fewer children. Who will honor our memories when we're gone?

More significantly, in the world of the very old, who will take care of us — in restaurants, stores, hospitals and assisted-living facilities? Current labor shortages, in many industries now a crisis, will reach catastrophic levels in the future. Wages and costs will skyrocket.

What will the political climate be like? The tax structure? Will anyone be willing to pay for schools? Who will

cover the cost of our health care and eldercare if the federal deficits and unprecedented demand wipe out Medicaid and Medicare? And when millions of boomers can no longer drive safely, how will they get groceries? See their friends? Visit the great-great-grandkids? As fast as time flies, we know the next 30 years will be here in an instant. When the world becomes very gray, how will we respond? Rather than rush to the edge of the cliff, we need to start thinking now. We need to plan the revolutionary changes that must be made in our housing, caregiving systems, transportation, tax structure, street systems and more.

As for our photos, I've decided we need to enjoy them while we're alive then let someone else cart them off when we're gone. It won't matter then. But there are a host of other issues that will, and we need to prepare.

Most of us age accidentally, without planning or forethought. Aging Deliberately tells us how to age on purpose. You can reach Liz Taylor at lizt@agingdeliberately.com or write to P.O. Box 11601, Bainbridge Island, WA 98110. Her Web site is www.agingdeliberately.com.

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