

Shortly after Telemachos' birth, his father Odysseus went with his fellow Greeks to avenge their loss of honor against the Trojans. For ten years, they battled the Trojans, and then for ten years Odysseus wandered the Mediterranean, pursued by Poseidon as punishment for blinding the Cyclops. After 20 years, Odysseus finally washes up onto the shores of his native Ithaca and arrives at his swineherd's hut. On Ithaca, the goddess Athena reveals herself to Odysseus and says that she has always been with him; Odysseus replies, in effect, "Really?". Athena's response is that "I never did have any doubt, but in my heart always knew how you would come home" but she didn't want to anger Poseidon. It is as if she thought "what difference does ten years make?" Well, from the gods' point of view, ten years does not matter. They are immortal. From the human perspective, however, ten years is everything. Indeed, while talking to the swineherd, Telemachos walks up and the first words that Odysseus hears his now adult son speak are to call the swine-herder, "Abba," or an intimate form of "father" (think "papa"). Homer reveals the effect of this separation in a later passage when he writes, "So he spoke, and sat down again, but now Telemachos folded his great father in his arms and lamented, shedding tears, and desire for mourning rose in both of them; and they cried shrill in a pulsing voice, even more than the outcry of birds, ospreys or vultures with hooked claws, whose children were stolen away by men of the fields, before their wings grew strong; such was their pitiful cry and the tears their eyes wept".

In one of the classes I am taking, there is a girl who looks just like my ex-fiancée (we'll call my ex "S"). They have the same hair, same mannerisms, same physique. Every time I see her, I am reminded of S and that time of our lives. At the same time, every time I see this girl, I am painfully aware of how young S and I were. We were kids, and yet living a life together. We, well I can't speak for her, were too young to be dealing with her parents' animosity, and in retrospect I am surprised at how long she resisted her parents' attempts to break up us before we finally imploded. I am painfully aware of how much I have grown, how much I have gone through, and what a difference 20 years makes.

As someone who is still searching for his mate, it seems to me that males are encouraged to date younger women, and in my own life I have certainly done so. On more than one occasion, I dated women a decade and a half my junior. I have many friends who are in mid-20s, and I have more than once been accused of trying to date more than one of them. Of late, however, I have come to realize what a difference more than a decade makes. As part of this, I have actually had conversations with my mid-20s female friends where I explicitly tell them that I am not interested in them romantically. It isn't that I see myself as a father figure, it isn't that I don't find them attractive, it isn't that I don't enjoy their company, it isn't that I think they are immature, it's that I see more clearly that we are in different places in life. For a few, such as my hiking partner, I am forced to resort to Chinese to express how I value our "wang nian jiao" (a good friendship despite vast differences in ages). Indeed, what I often say is that I would rather be a long time friend rather than a short term romantic partner.

I don't have a final answer to what ages are appropriate. I have no moral judgment if people choose to date people with decade or so difference in ages. I cannot even promise that I won't attempt to date a female who differs greatly from me in age. I write this essay to hopefully start a discussion, to explore the pros and cons of considering age when choosing a partner. As always, I write this as someone who is trying to be a moral person, even if I don't have the standard guides of religion to follow.

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