

Food For Thought Article: “God, Me, and Ageing.”

One of the things we share is that we are all senescent i.e. growing older. This is one of the facts of life in our present bodies and on this present earth.

But how do we view this reality? Do our advancing years bring with them a sense of fulfilment and fruitfulness or do they bring a sense of decline and foreboding?

What is generally true is that life expectancy, across the globe, is increasing. The average world life expectancy is currently 73.4 years. Italy has the highest life expectancy for males (82.2 years), and Japan for females (88.0 years). At the lower end of the spectrum, average life expectancy in Nigeria is 53.9 years and Chad is 53.7 years (See www.worldometers.info/demographics/life-expectancy).

Key factors in determining long life seem to be diet, exercise, access to clean water, good healthcare and especially family closeness and community bonding.

However, because we are all, mostly, living longer (quantity of life), are we all living better (quality of life)? Are we paying enough attention to both the benefits and the drawbacks of growing older? Our answers to these questions may depend on our current state of health and where we are on the life cycle. Young people tend to think they are indestructible; older people realise they are not!

Some of the Benefits of being Older.

New horizons and perspectives

James Hollis writes: “The second half of life... presents a rich possibility for spiritual enlargement, for we are never going to have greater powers of choice... more lessons from which to learn... or possess more emotional resilience... more insight into what works for us... or a deeper conviction of the importance of getting our life back.” [Hollis J., 2005, *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life*, New York: Gotham Books].

I think it is also true that older people, who have a more complete vision of life and can assess the significance of the beginning, the middle, and the end of life’s journey, are often able to help younger people reflect on ageing and maybe help them reassess their priorities and values.

Another benefit of being older is that there can be a shift away from ‘doing’ towards stillness, contemplation, reflection and ‘being.’ This can give rise to a greater transcendence i.e. a feeling of rising above earlier concerns and worries towards a greater connectedness with God.

Abraham was 75 years old when God called him (Gen.12:4). Simeon was an old man who was 'righteous and devout' and the Holy Spirit was 'upon him' as he looked for the 'consolation of Israel' (Lk. 2:25-32).

Anna was an 84-year-old widow from the tribe of Asher (which means 'happy one'), but she had experienced a lot of unhappiness in her life. Most likely married when she was about 15 years old, her husband died 7 years later so she had lived as a widow for around 62 years. No second husband, no children mentioned. However, her connectedness with God was remarkable, worshipping him 24/7 and talking about Jesus to all who would listen (See Lk. 2:36-38).

Fifty years ago, I attended All Nations Christian College at Easneye House, a Bible and Missionary training College here in England. The main house had been the home of the Buxton family who moved there in 1868. A year after this, Lady Hannah Buxton (who was aged 86 at the time) wrote a letter to her grandson John Henry Buxton which contained this prophetic prayer: -

'That this place may ever be inhabited by faithful servants of God in and through Jesus Christ, and that it may ever be a habitation of God in the hearts of the inhabitants by the Holy Spirit, and Christ be honoured, confessed and served, and this place be a fountain of blessing in the church and to the world.'



[Credit: commons.wikimedia.org]

God has wonderfully answered this prayer with thousands of students having come from all nations to study there and gone to all nations to work and share the Gospel.

For Lady Hannah ('Granny') Buxton, life's meaning and purpose had become clearer in later life, together with what is important, and there was the desire to pass this on to the next and succeeding generations.

Some of the Drawbacks of being Older.

Physical deterioration

Firstly, there is the physical deterioration of old age. King Solomon, who probably wrote the book of Ecclesiastes when he was in his 70's, gives a vivid account of this decline. The Message version of Eccles. 12:1-5 expresses this well I think: -

'Honour and enjoy your Creator while you are still young. Before the years take their toll and your vigour wanes; before your vision dims and the world blurs (cataracts?) and the winter years keep you close to the fire.

In old age, your body no longer serves you so well. Muscles slacken, grip weakens, joints stiffen. The shades are pulled down on the world. You can't come and go at will. Things grind to a halt. The hum of the household fades away ('empty nest syndrome?'). You are wakened now by bird-song.

Hikes to the mountains are a thing of the past. Even a stroll down the road has its tremors. Your hair turns apple-blossom white, adorning a fragile and impotent matchstick body. Yes, you're well on your way to eternal rest, while your friends make plans for your funeral.'

Nevertheless, I think God gives most of us time to think through the implications of growing older and our approaching death.

Bernard Cooper, in his book 'The Bill from My Father' (Picador, 2013) writes:

'The realisation that we are growing older comes to most of us in bearable increments; that way the full cargo of mortality doesn't sink the boat but is brought on board in the form of manageable hand luggage.'

Loneliness

Of course, the older we get the more we experience the loss of family and friends as they die. My mother-in-law was 98 years old when she died having lost her husband, brother, closest friends at church, those she went on holiday with etc. In her case, however, new relationships could be formed with her grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

But loneliness continues to blight the lives of many older people (as well as younger people). It is a big contributor to physical, mental, and emotional ill health. We could define loneliness as 'a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship.' It occurs when there is a mismatch between the quantity and quality of the relationships we have and those we want.

According to Waldinger & Schulz, satisfaction with relationships is the best predictor of a happy and healthy life - even more so than our cholesterol level! (Waldinger & Schulz, *The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness*, 2023).

Mental ill-health

Mental illness can take many forms but the most common form in older people is Alzheimer's disease. Currently there are just over 40 million people with this disease worldwide and this figure is expected to rise to 150 million by 2050.

Alzheimer's is a disease of the brain for which, at the present time, there is no cure, but some drugs are now available which may help to slow down the development of the disease. This disease calls into question what it means to be a person and affects not just the person with the symptoms but their entire circle of family and friends.

If you want to get inside the world of someone with dementia, I would recommend watching the 2020 film 'The Father,' starring Sir Anthony Hopkins. He plays the part of an 80-year-old Welshman with the disease, and the film graphically shows both what he is experiencing and the impact it is having on his relationships, especially with his daughter (played by Olivia Coleman).

However, as Christians we can ask, 'Can Alzheimer's, or any other form of mental illness, separate us from the love of God?' After all, God has engraved our name on his hand (Is. 49:16). Surely, he remembers us even if, or when, we are not able to remember him.

And those with Alzheimer's don't usually lose their emotional memory. They are still able to experience, love, joy, sadness etc. Emotional memory can be accessed when cognitive memory fails, so singing, praying, worshipping can all help the person reconnect with their faith and with God. As cognition fades spirituality can flourish.

I heard recently of an elderly lady who had a scientific background and throughout her life had been unable to accept the Christian faith believing it was incompatible with her scientific understanding of the world. Then she developed Alzheimer's and her resistance simply melted away and she was able to embrace Christ!

So, What Do Older People Need?

Older people are not a separate species but have the same basic needs as people of all ages e.g. the need to give and receive love, to be creative, to find hope, to accept the unresolved, to be included and to show gratitude.

There is a need to tell their 'life story' and pull all the strands together. This is about identity, integration, and completion. There is the need to be listened to.

There may be the need to seek healing, forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace. There is the need to discuss and prepare for death and they may also need to talk about legacy. A legacy is anything left or handed on by a predecessor and may be a material or a spiritual blessing.

Jenny Goodman writes: "The experience of our latter years should be shifted from 'everybody expecting me just to wind down and disintegrate' to a place of joyful, conscious ripening, with a revitalising sense of focus and self-worth: a place from which to harvest the fruits of a lifetime." [Goodman J., 1999, 'Harvesting a Lifetime', Spirituality & Ageing, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.]

Psalm 92 verses 12 to 15 continues the theme of fruitfulness in old age: "The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, 'the Lord is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him.' "

As older people come to the end of their lives, there is also the need to acknowledge the inevitability of unfinished business ~ the 'unsolved,' the 'not-known,' the 'not understood,' the 'painful encounters,' the 'mistakes'. Like Jesus on the cross, older people may cry out, 'Why?'

To show gratitude

Gratitude is transformational and is part of our psychological immune system. It plays a part in how we cope with adversity. Gratitude consists of acknowledging goodness in one's life, recognising the sources of this goodness and expressing thanks to those sources.

Attitudes which mitigate against gratitude include taking people and things for granted, having too high expectations that can never be reached, and assuming we have earned and deserve what we've got.

This latter attitude of ingratitude is demonstrated, shockingly, by Bart Simpson, Homer's son, in the fictional family the Simpsons. Bart says, in a grace before a meal, 'Dear God, we paid for this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing.'

To move freely between past, present, and future

Another need older people have concerns the need to be able to move freely between past, present and future. Remembering the past is important, but only if we focus on past positive events in our lives and don't get stuck in the past. Too much nostalgia can become painful and counter-productive.

And we should live most of our lives in the present, enjoying today with all its gifts and possibilities as well as facing any challenges. Also, we need to focus on our future destiny, when God makes everything new. New Bodies, new Jerusalem, new Heaven, new Earth.

84-year-old Anna gave thanks to God (Gratitude) and spoke about the baby Jesus 'to all who were **looking forward** to the redemption of Jerusalem.' (Lk. 2:38) 'What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived - the things God has prepared for those who love him' (1 Cor. 2:9).

So, one of the best antidotes to losing heart and becoming discouraged in the present, is to have this forward look into the future and remember that 'our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs them all.' (2 Cor. 4:17)

To be included

Not only does God want his Church to be international, but he also wants it to be intergenerational. Tragically, especially in Western cultures, older people are not given enough respect and are often overlooked.

Philip Newell writes: 'Old age is repeatedly devalued into an inferior state of being, regarded as a decline or fall from the fullness of life. We have forgotten the fruit that an old tree can bear; yielding an abundance that will far outweigh the crops of the young.' [Newell, J.P., 1999, 'One Foot in Eden: A Celtic View of the Stages of Life', Paulist Press].

Currently, America is one of the most age-diverse yet age-segregated societies in the world. Marc Freedman, founder of CoGenerate, an organisation dedicated to bridging generational divides, writes: 'In the early part of the 20th century, we reorganised society to make it more efficient by creating laws and institutions that move young people into educational institutions, middle age people into

workplaces, and older people into retirement communities and nursing homes.’ As a result, he says, generations stopped meeting and ‘we created a nation that has largely lost a sense of the wholeness of life.’

In our churches, therefore, we need to integrate people of all ages, listen to each other, and worship and work together. Sometimes Church leaders can give the impression that they are more concerned about the children and young families who are absent than the older folk who are present!

But perhaps we can summarise this section on ‘what do older people need?’ by saying that they need supportive connections such as from clubs, churches, younger friends. They also need as much control over their lives as possible, regular, reliable human contact and stimulation, and practical help. They need the opportunity to be creative, to be included, and the opportunity to reflect on their life with satisfaction and a sense of worthiness.

Learning from the London Marathon

A few years ago, I went to watch the London Marathon.

Whilst the younger spectators were interested in the elite runners and the possibility of seeing a world record time, the thing that impressed me most was the number of runners who were in their 60’s, 70’s and 80’s who were absolutely committed to finishing the race. I was stationed near the end of the course, with just 2 miles of the 26 to go, and the steely determination on their age-worn faces was impressive.

It struck me that what older people need is not someone to physically come and ‘rescue’ them and take them out of the race, but someone to accompany, support, and encourage them as they approach the finishing line. It is a mistake to only see older folk as weary, exhausted individuals. We need to hear how their race has been run and what they have experienced on their journey of life. Yes, some may stumble and fall, but they still have an important story to tell of how they ran the Marathon race which is their life.

The apostle Paul writes, ‘I’ve got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward - to Jesus. I’m off and running and I’m not turning back.’ (Phillip. 3:14 - The Message.)

Learning from the London Minithon

A few months ago, at the other end of the spectrum, I went to watch our youngest grandson, compete in an athletics Minithon for 8 to 12-year-olds.

Teams were there from all over the southeast of England. To see the energy, commitment and discipline of these youngsters was wonderful. The place was buzzing!

Is it not possible, I wonder, to combine the age, determination, and experience of older folks with the life and vitality of youngsters? Surely, this is what we need to be aiming for in our families, our churches, and our communities.

Any age limits in the Bible?

The only reference to 'retirement' in the Bible appears to be in Numbers 8:23-26 where the Lord says to Moses, 'This applies to the Levites: men twenty-five years old or more shall come to take part in the work at the tent of meeting, but at the age of fifty, they must retire from their usual duties and work no longer. They may assist their brothers in performing their duties at the tent of meeting, but they themselves must not do the work.'

However, in general, there is no age limit to being active and serving the Lord.

As we have already noted, Abraham was 75 years old when God called him (Gen. 12:4); Sarah was 90 years old when she had Isaac even though she described herself as 'worn out' (Gen. 17:17 & 18:11&12). Moses was 120 when he died, 'yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone' (Deut. 34:7).

And Caleb, who was 40 years old when Moses first sent him and Joshua to spy out the land of Canaan, said, 45 years later when he was 85, 'I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out; I'm just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then' (See Josh. 14:10-12). This is remarkable and seems to be down to the fact that he believed God's word and followed him wholeheartedly.

In his book 'The Only Earth We Know,' Fred Kaan has the words of a song, the first verse of which poses two questions and then there is a refrain: -

'Was the world to end tomorrow, would we plant a tree today?

Would we till the soil of loving, kneel to work, and rise to pray?

Refrain: Pray that at the end of living, of philosophies and creeds,

God will find the people busy, planting trees and sowing seeds.'

But I close with another prayer/song, Psalm 71, which is a psalm for old age. The writer is getting on in years and has a long memory of God's faithfulness. He says:

‘For you have been my hope, Sovereign Lord, my confidence since my youth. From my birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother’s womb. I will ever praise you. Since my youth, God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvellous deeds’ (verses 5,6, &17).

However, the writer doesn’t gloss over the difficult times, ‘Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again; from the depths of the earth, you will again bring me up’ (verse 20).

And his prayer for himself, now that he is ‘old and grey’ is twofold:

1. That God will not abandon him as his strength fails (verse 9)
2. That he will be able to declare God’s power to the next generation, God’s might to all who are to come (verse 18)

May this be our own personal prayer and the prayer we pray for the older people we know as we seek to integrate them into our families and fellowships.

George Irving – July 2024

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