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The third age

Does old age have to be an awful period of exclusion or could it be a time for knowing what really matters? asks **Jeff Weston**

'What's the point of going out?' my father muttered to himself about two years ago, age 82. 'I've seen everything.' It was a momentary lapse that didn't reflect his character. He's not a cynical man. He'd always been enthusiastic, giving, curious, a talented electrical engineer, an amateur historian, family tree devotee and loving grandfather. Those lines said a lot though. On that day, he felt a little bored with life – with the streets around him, possibilities, the same old buildings in the centre of town and perhaps the conversations he was having with people.

> "Young people can seem like juggernauts to the old – talking fast, living at full throttle, being a little slapdash and rarely considering each angle to a debate or situation

He'd seen *everything*. It was candid, humorous, yet also worrying – indicative of despair, a lack of hope and maybe a sense that he was no longer central to how society was evolving and changing. He felt less powerful, less influential, unable to make a difference – almost like an old, unused machine forgotten about in someone's spare room.

What connections he'd had, had dwindled. His apprentice from decades ago had recently passed away – a funny, extraordinarily original man who never forgot the patience, persistence and lateral thinking my father brought to projects and instilled in him. Also, my father's old boss over what seemed like half a lifetime, had died, bringing a deep feeling of mortality and fragility to the surface.

'Seniority prunes possibility',[1] we 'slide to nothingness'[1] and the world eventually ends,[2] darker analysis concludes. This is a tad dramatic and quite pessimistic, but it does touch upon some of the fears in old age. We see people in their 20s, 30s and early 40s running around – seemingly 'masters of the universe' – but we know deep down that only wisdom and *lived* years provide perspective and insight; the act of rolling our eyes commonplace when listening to inflated assertions and misplaced confidence in some of the young.

So whose truth is the truth then? That of the over-50s, slightly grizzled, battered and veteran-like, having witnessed the world in all its befuddled beauty, or that of the under-45s, with their certainty, sureness, rudimentary wit and prosaic tales of alcohol-induced fun? (Forty-five to 49, a no man's land of dubious loyalty – one foot in each camp.)

'We become invisible at 50,' a dear friend said to me recently – him, 58, myself, 53. And there are different grades of 'old' once past that number: 60 a kind of 'Wish I could retire and escape the rat race'; 70, the firm acceptance that unless you're a US president, the chances of having much power are pretty slim; 80 'death [gazing] at you levelly from the foot of your bed'.[3]

It didn't worry my friend that he was now seen as some kind of 'extra' in his department,

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2 Hill R. What we are last. [Online.] www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v32/n20/rosemary-hill/what-we-are-last (accessed 24 November 2023).

3 Parker J. An ode to middle age. [Online.] www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/01/ode-to-middle-age/603067 (accessed 24 November 2023).

a dinosaur of sorts or flailing relic from another era. But it did concern him that his thoughts were treated as somehow *less* valid, piercing or relevant, as if anachronistic or stale (this despite him having a sharp brain, plenty of vigour – he has a black belt in Shukokai karate and purple belt in kickboxing – and an excellent sense of humour).

Cult of youth

The switch from a cult of age to a cult of youth,[4] alas, isn't a new phenomenon. Between the late 18th and early 19th century in America, for example, men went from wearing powdered wigs and long coats (in order to look old), to wearing natural hair or toupees and tight-fitting waistcoats and trousers. Also, a new language of abuse and ridicule for the old was developed. And even the domain of family portraits was altered: the male head of the household no longer towering over his wife and children in a vertical composition, but having to be content with a horizontal composition[4] (thus, both generations on the same level).

There is, of course, class and patriarchy at play here, but it demonstrates how youth and a distinct '...ideological shift from deference to democracy'[4] began to drive things. Gone were the agrarian days when the old were looked after on the farm. Western society was now in the grip of industrialisation and urbanisation, and so extended families in one place become fewer and fewer.

The lack of deference today seems even more poignant. The pejorative word 'codger' from 1756[4] is rarely heard, and yet there is the sense that '...if elders don't have the decency to be helpless and useless, they are still in the way'.[1] In other words, they should *move aside* for the young, consider the days of the venerable sage well and truly over, and not harness their maturity and wealth of knowledge unless sat among themselves.

It's a troubling dilemma. And to not be 'seen' is incredibly disheartening. The average age of a British worker is 42, according to the International Labour Organisation. Add to this the prevalence of long-term health conditions[5] (50% of those aged 50, 80% of those aged 65) and the slim chance of someone in their 30s picturing themselves 20 years from now (thus potentially showing a high degree of empathy), and the outlook often becomes one of disparity and a lack of understanding across the generations.

Young people can seem like juggernauts to the old – talking fast, living at full throttle, being a little slapdash and rarely considering each angle to a debate or situation. Plenty of old workers therefore suddenly see themselves in a frustrating ocean of newness and naivety – often judged harshly because they see nuance and modulation when all around them see Yes or No, Black or White.

James Parker refers to this stage as '...not [being] an apprentice adult anymore... [but rather making it] through the disorientation period'.[3] Like the first 50 years are some kind of trial, but now we can actually *see*. See, but not be seen. Oh, the unpleasant irony. Elders used to be a '...living substitute for history books in a preliterate society,'[4] but

> "...numerous cultures discourage the subject of death, being scared, lonely, *expressing* one's self

> We need projects – no matter what our age; projects to keep our minds supple and our bodies likewise

now they are Googled out of the way, destined to be pushed down some metaphorical stairs and de-valued.

Bar an adjustment to the school curriculum and deep attachments (family, friends, acquaintances) being highlighted and discussed, the likelihood of this continued mistreatment or disdain for the old will persist. And in some ways that's surprising, given that '...one in four female workers and one in eight male workers have caring responsibilities'.[5] It's as if that same loving impetus within families is not carried through into society, the workplace and beyond.

But maybe that is my own experience, that of my friend and others I've spoken to; quick-fire exchanges with the young that provide little comfort in terms of depth, connection and progress. What we are at last is true or ill, to paraphrase Rosemary Hill, and with each 'condition' comes candidness and unreserved honesty – qualities all too often sieved out of us during our working lives in the interests of diplomacy, prudence and compromise.

At last

'I found a thrill to rest my cheek to,'[6] Etta James gloriously sings in *At Last*, as if finally discovering the terrain, the love, the road she had always dreamed of. Love, indeed, isn't too far away from that supposed ideal of the elderly because '...most of all they want to be wanted'.[7] Away from the materialism and gleam of modern life, they wish to be cosseted, valued and simply spoken to; treated as interesting – not reclassified as a burden or a challenge.[1] Their address books may resemble graveyards, but that, more than anything, emphasises their new orbit, before an obituary descends upon them. But still, numerous cultures discourage the subject of death, being scared, lonely, *expressing* one's self. 'Don't talk your business to people,'[5] is the norm among older African Caribbean women. And the British stiff upper lip is ever present: 'Just get on with it;'[8] 'I shouldn't complain – there's plenty... worse off than me'.[9]

There can be an attitude in older people of *constantly* having to be resilient and resourceful – otherwise they're thought less of, shame and embarrassment parking up on the driveway. There's the theory or idea of protecting the children – shielding them from our real worries and concerns. That is perhaps why some keep it bottled up, why hardly any of the 65+ age group seek counselling (they represent just 4.1% of clients),[5] despite Age UK research showing that 60% of them '...have experienced depression and anxiety'.[8]

Would the children – mostly adults of course – want it this way? Somehow getting *less* than the sum total of their parent's or parents' swirling thoughts, distress or anguish? When things are often put to bed, appeased or resolved with a few comforting words or reassuring hugs. Gestures, togetherness, understanding – it all helps, particularly from family. But what if a wider inclusivity existed? What if we didn't mock the old, or the young, or those who don't immediately 'get something' or have difficulty comprehending what appears obvious to the majority? Tolerance and patience often get steamrolled in modern societies. And laughter becomes a delicate balancing act between acute observation and cruelty.

I shook my head the other day and muttered 'unbelievable!' (expletives extracted) when an elderly woman – perhaps in her 80s – decided to use *both* lanes while approaching a roundabout. It was a comical moment that could have had fatal consequences, but it also teetered between those two gambits or manoeuvres in life which define us: a) finding fun in a situation, or b) stepping back and acknowledging someone's pain or vulnerability.

The terrors of old age

The terrors of old age (said to have replaced death, judgment, heaven and hell) are: boredom, illness, dementia and solitude.[2] And approaching death in a secular society is particularly difficult, as death represents a terminus rather than a gateway.[1] Of the elements we *can* control though or certainly defy – boredom and solitude – perhaps it's time to shout this a little more. Indeed, perhaps it's time to momentarily eradicate the status quo from our minds and interact more – young, old, preschool and middle-aged.

Good societies should embed intergenerational care, otherwise a form of age apartheid (the segregation of generations) grows. If only to dismantle some of the awful statistics that exist in order to improve our wellbeing as a nation, such a 'coming together' is essential: '...60% of those living in residential care have poor mental health [and] one quarter of young adults (18-34 years) believe that it is normal to be unhappy and depressed in old age',[5] for example.

The 'incurability of oldness'

Counselling can be one part of the solution. The young counselling the old. And vice versa. Also, recognising that barriers often exist – with older people lacking mobility[8] and thus requiring therapists to home visit. A strikingly beautiful example of the young and old benefitting from each other's presence, however, is children visiting a care home,[10] the immediate trade-off of increased empathy

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5 British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. Policy briefing: counselling older people. [Online.] www.bacp.co.uk/about-us/advancing-the-profession/influencing-decision-makers/older-people/counselling-older-people (accessed 24 November 2023).

6 James E. At last. [Online.] www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qJU8G7gR_g (accessed 15 January 2024).

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9 Chong SL. Never too old to talk. [Online.] www.bacp.co.uk/news/news-from-bacp/blogs/2021/10-august-never-too-old-to-talk (accessed 27 November 2023).

10 Clarke E. The benefits of children visiting a care home. [Online.] https://connectchildcare.com/blog/the-benefits-of-children-visiting-a-care-home (accessed 27 November 2023).

(understanding different physical abilities) and being entertained (hearing children's stories and nursery rhymes, and witnessing their excitement).

Gone are the common stereotypes when people interact and share stories, such as old people 'being "splendid" in some unspecified way'[2] or old people '...bobbing round each other like quizzical dolls'.[7] In other words, broad brushstrokes in terms of who they really are – a not wanting to know, indifference, meagre interest, the *exclusion* in the opening of this article.

The 'incurability of oldness'[11] goes without saying, but some counsellors are 'uncomfortable'[11] with this, Stanley Jacobson writes, and quick to reach for an elaborate description of illness or tarnish the oldie before them with late-life depression. Oliver Balch, writing about the incredible exploits of graduate, Teun Toebes, who chose to live in a nursing home for dementia sufferers and thus form lasting and reciprocal relationships, aptly ends his piece with the words: 'Everyone needs freedom and friendship, whatever their condition.'[12]

Freedom and friendship – absolutely. Imagine *anyone* living out their final decade on Earth inside an institution, never mind a person with Alzheimer's who suffers from memory loss and cognitive difficulties (their remaining years typically eight to 10 following diagnosis).[12] What would they need? How would they cope? What things could be put in place for continuity, enjoyment and optimism?

Routine to-do lists and activities in this case. But also good people around them – caring people, whose job it is to, more than ever, *be* that carer in their job title; inventive, considerate, respectful and fun.

Crazy age

In *Crazy Age: thoughts on being old*, the author Jane Miller '...finds her granddaughter simply does not believe that her grandmother was ever 12'.[2] It's an amusing tale that adds permanency to the old, as if they have always been that way. And retirement, empty nesting and widowhood, I presume, all add to that feeling of isolation, lack of meaning and even doubt as to *who* or *what* we were. It's strange, but I've only ever counselled a handful of people over the age of 60. This age group do indeed seem to hide away, remain stoical, or keep their deeper thoughts to themselves. Or perhaps they follow the example of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who said that '...a task is a life-preserver'.[13] We need projects – no matter what our age; projects to keep our minds supple and our bodies likewise.

I regularly speak to people over 60 – some while watching Fleetwood Town FC and others while playing table tennis in Bolton. Both environments are seemingly suitable haunts or lairs to relax, converse, compete or get fit. What they conveniently hide, however, are psychologists' studies '...revealing that the strongest personality changes tend to happen before age 30 – and after 60'.[14]

We recalibrate our goals it appears, as we edge close to retirement. While the pre-30 crowd are figuring themselves out in terms of the 'Big Five' personality traits (agreeableness, conscientiousness, extroversion, openness to experience and neuroticism),[14] the post-60 crowd are fine-tuning such areas – happy to prioritise what they find meaningful. Declines in openness to experience and extroversion, for example, may respectively mean that one has begun to relish routine over thrills and wishes to spend more time with people he/she already loves.[14]

It's elegant in a way – ingenious and simple – and such focus can restore harmony and bring inner peace: no longer chasing things; no longer being uncertain; but rather allowing that which is immediately around us to become the bedrock of our existence.

One of the more beautiful lines I stumbled across while researching this article was by Rosemary Hill from a review of Jane Miller's *Crazy Age: thoughts on being old*. 'Her gently discursive account, part essay and part memoir, has a modestly pioneering air, as if old age were a country in which she has recently and unexpectedly come to live.'[2]

A country no less! Reviewed in 2010 – 13 years ago – I considered such a find not unlucky, but so very fortunate, due to its brilliant imagery. Old age *is* a country – a new and mysterious place that can be both crippling and joyful. And brutal statistics such as '...those with a positive attitude to ageing [are] estimated to live an average of seven and half years longer',[5] don't always help, particularly as adversity can unhinge the best of us.

What is maybe more important is knowing ourselves after such a long, turbulent and eventful ride. Knowing – away from the sheen and bluster – what *really* matters. ●

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YOUR THOUGHTS, PLEASE

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