

# GROW OLD ALONG WITH ME ...

a creative approach to ageing

Social Care lecture  
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for the Archdiocese of Edinburgh & St Andrew's  
November 9<sup>th</sup> 2006 at Gillies College Edinburgh



## **Introduction**

Two images of ageing immediately came to mind when I began to think about this lecture. The first was those lines from Browning

*Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be,*

and the second was words attributed to Cicero

*life is a play with a poorly written last act.*

Whether we accept one of these and reject the other or whether we try to hold the two in some sort of critical balance will be the principal concern of this lecture.

Like many people, I suppose that my introduction to what was known as 'old people' came via my grandparents. I can remember a grandfather with a prickly moustache that felt decidedly odd when he kissed me, a grandmother who seemed to be someone to be greatly feared and in front of whom I had to be on my very best behaviour, another grandfather who smiled at me just before he died and his wife, my grandmother, who came to live with us as soon as he died. She was very old and clearly not able to be left on her own. I now realise that she was sixty four and lived with us for the next twenty four years of her life.

My first 'real' encounter with 'old people' came when I was first ordained and, without any relevant training or preparation was thrown into ministry amongst them. It was a salutary experience but now, as I look back, it was a hugely important and significant one. The very first person that I ever administered Holy Communion to was an eighty eight year old lady called Mary Robinson – I remember her so well. A few weeks after meeting her she fell in the street and lay in the gutter for quite some time with a broken arm. I naively asked her if she was in much pain when I visited her and I shall never forget her reply: "I count it as a great privilege that I am able to share in the pain of the world at my age". This was not smug piety but a profound reflection upon her journey of faith. There is much that I could tell you about Mary Robinson and her sister Margaret but time does not allow it, but I am quite convinced that my encounter with her, forty four years ago, had a profound influence upon the development of my own ministry, although it took me a long time to realise this.

But my first awareness of growing old came much earlier than this. I can pinpoint it almost to the day. I was seven years old, I returned to school in September 1946 leaving the Infants and beginning at the Junior school. When I arrived I saw that, in the summer holidays, a wonderful climbing frame in the shape of a ship had been erected in the Infant School playground and I was too old to go and play on it. I was moving on from one age group to another and I experienced a profound sense of loss and I probably felt that there was a fundamental unfairness about the process of growing old. At that age I didn't know about cheese and wine, if I had, I might have reflected that both improvement and deterioration comes with ageing and the skill is to know when and how to differentiate between the two.

Someone said: *time has a way of heaping age on us year by year* – thus to live is to age – but to age is not necessarily to live. So, how do we age creatively so that we can truly be said to be living and to be living abundantly?

## **Our culture has problems with ageing**

Now our modern, Trans-Atlantic Western European culture has problems with ageing. Our modern world gives priority to all things technical and so ageing is considered as a pathology, it is the incurable disease of living. We live in a world where ageing is often viewed as an embarrassment, where suffering and dying are considered to be meaningless experiences and where death itself is so often seen to be a medical failure. As people grow older they often find themselves stranded in the uncharted territory of longer life expectancy. Modern medicine can keep them alive but it cannot give them meaning or purpose. So to explain ageing we can turn to biology, genetics or geriatric physiology but to 'understand' ageing we need something more. Ageing is fundamentally a mystery rather than a problem. A paper I read recently about mental health in old age talked about the need for people to have meaning; to have a sense of continuity; to be able to face up to their shadows and finally to be open to change, not fixed and rigid in outlook.

## **Facing the reality of ageing**

I believe that there is much that is good about the ageing process, but that does not make me blind to some of its inevitable drawbacks and I suppose the most obvious of these is the fact that our bodies begin to wear out. I suspect that a great many people in this hall tonight are kept alive by the pills that they take and by the surgical or other interventions of our wonderful medical profession. We face slowdown, breakdown and meltdown. We experience anxiety and pain and we notice the changes that age makes to our bodies every time that we look into a mirror. We have to embrace the ageing process, we are no longer lamb, we are mutton, but that too can be quite pleasant. In a society that is obsessed with youth let us not forget that there are as many problems associated with youthfulness as there are pleasures. So let us try to recognise and embrace the pleasures of ageing as well as cope with its problems.

## **A time of change**

My story about the playground climbing frame is a reminder that ageing is but one of many stages that we move through in life as we move from one system of dependency into another. And, like all other stages, there are gains and losses to be experienced in this process. Mel Kimble, an eighty plus year old American who writes with great insight and beauty about ageing put it this way: *A cascade of changes and losses, endings and separations, mark one's passage through the life cycle. These changes and transitions of life sometimes impose pain and suffering and tax the human spirit. To be human, it would seem, always entails suffering.* If this sense of us journeying through life, from birth to death, moving from one stage to another with pluses and minuses attached to each is true, and I believe that it is, then it also means that we are preparing ourselves for ageing at a very early age. We are learning the techniques of coping, we are practising the challenge of finding meaning in life wherever we are, and we are growing used to the idea of loss and pain . . . all part of what it means to be human and all characteristics which will accompany us into our old age. So now is the time that we plant the seeds which will bear fruit as we grow older. Whether that fruit will be bitter or sweet to a considerable extent depends upon the spirit in which the seeds are being sown, unconsciously of course, just as now we are all living out the lives which we have fashioned for ourselves over the past decades. This is not to argue a strict determinism, nor is it to deny the possibility for change, but in general terms we reap what we sow. Wonderfully, mercifully, there is always the possibility for grace to overcome the barriers that we unwittingly build in order to protect ourselves from facing up to the essential vulnerability and fragility of existence. For most of us, it takes a whole lifetime to accept the fact that so very often our strength lies in our weakness and an acceptance of limitations can so often be the doorway into unimagined new freedoms.

## **Scaling down**

This is a nice way for me to move on to my next point, which is about the process and experience of scaling down. For most people increasing age means that they must learn to do with less. Less physical energy, less social status, less money coming in week by week or month by month. In almost every area there are experiences of diminution. The challenge is to find ways of turning these experiences in to positive challenges, creative opportunities. If it is difficult to bend down to tie your shoelaces, are there any other things you can do whilst you are down there so that you don't have to bend down again a few minutes later! One of the biggest issues that many people face is deciding whether they need to scale down their living space, move into something smaller. In my experience, having talked to literally hundreds of people who have done this, there overwhelming view seems to be that, despite the sadness and sense of loss, there are enormous gains to be made if this decision is taken at the right time, freely chosen rather than demanded of a person. A smaller garden, lower running costs, nearness to bus stops or shops, accessibility to the surgery or hospitals, perhaps even a move to be closer to your church. Moving home *can* be a creative process. And, of course, when you have done it once it is easier to do it again if, later on, you need to consider moving into some form of residential care. The clue to successful moves seems to be to plan these things when you have choices, when you are empowered, rather than when circumstances have overtaken you and you are left with no choice. Planning a nursing home or residential care five years or more before you expect to need it can be an interesting project. I know of one lady who regularly had a few days in different homes for several years, trying them out and comparing and contrasting one with another. Of course not everyone can do this – but I hope you can sense the gist of what I am saying.

Learning how to let go can be a painful process, but it can also be very liberating. When I retired from active parish ministry it was difficult for me to give away more than two thousand books – but I can honestly say that I have hardly missed them at all and I am actually in the process of giving a lot more away – those that I knew I would need but haven't actually opened for years! I regard the challenge to travel lightly as a very real one, I grapple with it and would like to think that, on balance, it is something that I am managing quite well – and that in itself is a liberating and affirming experience. One of the 'in' phrases of the 1960s was 'small is beautiful'. Growing older gives us the chance to see if we really believe that. These are often difficult decisions for us to make; they require courage, analytical skills, determination and hope. Growing older can be just as intellectually challenging as entering any other stage of life and the consequences can be just as rewarding, perhaps even more so.

## **Recognising achievement**

Western societies tend to lay a great deal of stress upon what people achieve, this can be a good thing, although not if success is limited to issues of financial reward, status or the abundance of one's possessions. We need to be able to recognise the achievements of nurturing a family, of loving one's partner, of surviving the strains and stresses of contemporary living – or enduring the deprivations of wartime conditions earlier in life. Many people achieve a great deal in terms of coping with physical or mental handicap, people can achieve great friendships or develop a love of literature, music or painting. It is good to be able to look back on our life and recognise the things that we have achieved, those things which add significance and meaning to our life. Perhaps we are the only one's who know about them, but maybe even without knowing it, we have achieved remarkable success in many different areas. Ten or so years ago, in parish ministry, I encouraged the congregation one Harvest Festival time to bring to church some of the harvest of their lives – we had a wonderful display, from works of art to jars of jam, from medals for sprinting and hurdling (gained seventy plus years ago) to knitted jackets, photographs of grandchildren, computer discs, books written or pieces of pottery or carving loving sculpted and created. The harvest of that small congregation was almost mind-blowing and deeply humbling. It enabled us to have a wonderful service of thanksgiving.

## ***Being grateful for our memories***

I remember that occasion and in remembering it my heart is warmed. The gift of memory is a precious and wonderful thing. It is one commodity that many older people have in abundance. Our memories can feed us or haunt us, they can be for our growth or for our diminishment and no doubt we can all focus upon experiences of both. I will return to those that haunt us in a few minutes, but for the moment let me focus upon the rich treasure store that each of us possesses. Creatively re-awakening memories is a skill that we need to pay more attention to, so that we can reflect on and rejoice in our memories without being locked into them in a way that does not enable us to grow and transcend them. Being locked in to the past can be as destructive as being obsessed about and fearful of the future. There is nothing as interesting as people and what amazingly rich and colourful lives most of us – all of us – have led. Lives of triumphing over tragedy, grief and sadness, lives of coping and conquering pain and suffering, lives of laughter and experiences of ridiculous situations, lives of love and forgiveness, of awe and beauty, of fear and anxiety. What a rich tapestry each one of us has woven and how wonderful to be able to reflect upon it and remember the good times with gratitude and the bad times with a sense of relief that we have come through them.

It is because our memory is so important that the experience of dementia is so debilitating. To lose one's memory and with it, a sense of one's identity, can be a very distressing thing for the person with dementia and for those who love them or care for them. This is not the time or place for me to expand on this subject, though it is something that I frequently do – at considerable length. Perhaps what I need to say here is that dementia is not an inevitable consequence of growing old, it is not something that we should expect as we grow older. Even in our nineties we are twice as likely not to have dementia as we are to have it, but having said that, we should not be too surprised if it comes our way and even now we can be preparing to make that journey in to a strange land more tolerable and acceptable. One of the good things about current thinking in dementia care is that it does not necessarily have to be a story of gloom and doom; there are possibilities of creative living even within the confines of those progressive and terminal illnesses which we describe by the term 'dementia'.

## ***Living with painful memories***

It would be wrong of me to concentrate only upon good memories and upon those which warm our hearts and bring a smile to our face. All of us, but some much more than others, have memories which can haunt us, stress us, diminish and perhaps shame us. As we grow older, so the number of things which we suppress or repress grows. Events that we have not been able to cope with, for whatever reason, in the past – which we have cast into our subconscious, may return in our later years to cause us distress or anxiety. Sometimes people cannot really be at peace until they have resolved those issues which were not dealt with at the time. Accompanying someone along that road can be a skilled and responsible task and it is not for everyone to try and do it. Allowing people to voice their fears and anxieties, to bring to the fore matters which have been buried in the past – without passing any kind of judgment and without offering soft options or pious platitudes can be a valuable resource to offer but not everyone is able to do that. Sharing someone's silence or accepting their tears may be more helpful than words and attempts to offer 'solution', and this is something that we can all aspire to do. To be alongside someone without any expectation of being able to understand fully or to anticipate any possible outcome is a powerful gift that many people are able to offer, but it is not an easy role to undertake and it is a journey into vulnerability and powerlessness.

We all have a shadow side to ourselves and one of the challenges of creative ageing is to know how to make the best use of the time and opportunities that we have to be honest about ourselves to ourselves, and perhaps (though not necessarily) to other people. The contents of our shadow can be as varied as the people we are; they will be different for each one of us, but they will be there. In another place I have written of this experience in this way:

*I know of burdens carried by people, often for over fifty years or more, which include acts of unfaithfulness by the person or their spouse, an abortion during teenage years, a baby taken away for adoption, the experience of child abuse (either as perpetrator or victim), feeling guilty about the death of a loved one, feeling that a wrong choice was made in marriage (which may or may not have resulted in divorce), unfulfilled or inappropriate sexual behaviour or expression – the list is endless.*

*What we have here is a huge slice of human experience and pain, a desperate need for acceptance and for laying down burdens. In traditional Christian language it is similar to, but not identical with, the whole process of penitence, forgiveness, absolution and restoration.*

## ***Towards reconciliation***

At a much simpler level, but also important is the opportunity that ageing gives us for repairing relationships, becoming reconciled with old adversaries and for reflecting upon the prides and passions that have sometimes made it difficult for us to be at ease with certain other people. Life is too precious for us to bear grudges. You may know the story of the two sisters-in-law who had a running feud with each other stretching over decades. After a gap of almost twenty years they met again at a family funeral. "Goodness me" said the one to the other, "how you have aged, I hardly recognised you." Quick as a flash the other retorted "Well, speak for yourself, I would have passed you by completely if it hadn't been for the coat you are wearing, it never did suit you!" One of the tasks of creative ageing is for us to experience and become agents for what is loosely called reconciliation. Being able to live at ease with ourselves and with others. As the hymn puts it:

*That with the world, myself and thee  
I, ere I sleep, at peace may be.*

## ***The gift of time***

I spoke earlier about downsizing; about how ageing invariably brought with it a reduction in a whole host of things – income, status, mobility, health etc. But one thing that ageing often brings with it, in great amounts, is time. The gift of time. I know that it is fashionable to say that as we grow older we don't know how we ever had enough time to work, there is just so much for us to do each day, but the reality is that most of us, perhaps all of us, have far more disposable time on our hands. So how do we use that time? Admittedly it is not always at the most convenient part of the day and many of us have plenty of time somewhere between 1am and 4am but nevertheless, we have time. It is a wonderful commodity and can be seen as a gift. Elderly people have time to reflect, to think about people, to care about people, to pray. I have always thought that a church that contains a large number of older people is very very fortunate, because it contains people who, by their thoughts and prayers can uphold and sustain the work of the church and those who are more active can be carried along by the supportive concern of those who have time to think about them. One person I knew, who was in great personal need, spoke of being *carried along on a surfboard of love* and I know exactly what she meant.

Michael Quoist, over forty years ago put it in a way that can hardly have been bettered:

*Lord, I have time,  
I have plenty of time  
All the time that you give me  
The years of my life  
The days of my years  
The hours of my days  
They are all mine.  
Mine to fill, quietly, calmly,  
But to fill completely, up to the brim  
To offer them to you, that of their insipid water  
You may make a rich wine such as you made once in Cana of Galilee*

### **Ageing and Spirituality**

As I draw to a close, let me say something about ageing and spirituality.

Now there are many different understandings about what we mean by that word and I have books on ageing which give twenty or so different definitions and it is certainly not my intention to go through them here. But when I speak about spirituality I am meaning more than religion, because not everyone is religious. I am trying to refer to whatever it is that gives meaning and significance to people. Whatever it is that enables them to transcend their own boundaries and stand in awe and wonder, to be aware of mystery and of the beauty and fragility of our existence. As we grow older, many people find that their thoughts turn more to these things and I want people to discover a spirituality that enlivens and supports them, that helps them to make some sort of sense of their lives and enables them to face the future with dignity and even with hope – for many people of course, but not for all, this is found within a church community.

It was the psychoanalyst Jung who wrote, eighty years or so ago, that when people are young they look for certainties, they want to know what is black and what is white, they want to know what is right and what is wrong. As we grow older, he said, we become less sure about certainties, and we look for those things which can help and support us in our doubt and our unknowing. When we are young we believe that we can change the world, when we are older we know that we have missed so many opportunities, made so many mistakes – so what we want then is some sort of reassurance and acceptance. In our youth we want certainty in our age we want understanding. What once we knew now we are less sure of; what once was clear now is much more complex and ambiguous. It is not the world that has changed, it is us. We stumble on in to our later years, bruised by our experiences, humbled by the extent of our ignorance and only too well aware of our frailty and incompleteness. And yet this sense of vulnerability, this awareness of our limitations, this hesitancy about the great mysteries of life should not be seen as weakness but as strength; not the cause for anxiety and guilt but the raw material of thanksgiving, for here, as we move towards the end of our life we are faced by the greatest mystery of all and I hope that I am already preparing myself to face it with a sense of dignity, even perhaps, with a sense of welcome – who knows – it is a great mystery.

I once wrote an article on ageing – it contained much of the material that I have shared with you this evening – and I closed it with the image of the stars which only shine in the night. They are always there of course, but it is only when the light goes, when the evening comes, when the busy world is hushed, that we become aware of their presence. I believe that as we age so we can become more aware of those things which have always been there, supporting and guiding us, but which because of our busyness, we have overlooked for so long.

To use a sailing analogy – which is totally beyond my experience, I hasten to say – we cannot change the wind but we can adjust our sails. And so it is with ageing.

I would like to believe that, as we grow old, we can deepen our love for the world and for all that is within it. Mary Robinson felt it a privilege to share in the pain of the world at her age, and so it is, and so it is. If I had some music to share with you at this moment, it would be Louis Armstrong's *What a Wonderful World* and one of Richard Strauss's *Four Last Songs*, but I don't have the music, so I must read the words of his final song.

*O broad, contented peace!  
So deep through trouble and joy  
we have walked hand in hand;  
we can rest from our wanderings  
now, above the peaceful country-side.*

*The valleys fall away around us,  
the sky is already darkening,  
Only a pair of larks still rise  
dreamily into the scented air.*

*Come here, and let them fly  
For soon it will be time to sleep  
and we must not lose our way  
in this solitude.  
in the sunset glow,  
How exhausted we are with our wanderings —  
can this then be death?*

Some of you have heard me use this final poem before, it was sent to the mother of one of the people killed in the London terrorist attack last year – and I think it sums up the challenge of ageing – that we should learn to love this mutilated world.

*Try to praise the mutilated world.  
Remember June's long days,  
and wild strawberries, drops of wine, the dew.  
The nettles that methodically overgrow  
the abandoned homesteads of exiles.  
You must praise the mutilated world.  
You watched the stylish yachts and ships;  
one of them had a long trip ahead of it,  
while salty oblivion awaited others.  
You've seen the refugees heading nowhere,  
you've heard the executioners sing joyfully.  
You should praise the mutilated world.  
Remember the moments when we were together  
in a white room and the curtain fluttered.  
Return in thought to the concert where music flared.  
You gathered acorns in the park in autumn  
and leaves eddied over the earth's scars.  
Praise the mutilated world  
and the grey feather a thrush lost,  
and the gentle light that strays and vanishes  
and returns.*

Malcolm Goldsmith