

Ageing with Purpose and Passion

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Ageing – The Unwanted Gift?

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My input has two main foundations and sources. Primarily it is based on my work as Director of Chaplaincy and Spirituality with Methodist Homes (MHA) – a role I occupied from 2001-2017; although I had added to that in my work now as Superintendent Minister of the York Circuit of the Methodist Church. And my second root is a short presentation I made in a parallel session at the 6th International Conference on Ageing and Spirituality at Los Angeles in 2015, which was later expanded together with my co-presenter in that session, Herbert Anderson from Chicago, and published as “The Promise and Peril of Finite Forever: The Paradox of Ageing” in the *Journal of Religion, Spirituality and Aging*.¹

I want to explore one particular aspect of that paradox in the pilgrimage of ageing – namely that while many see the extension of the lifespan as something to celebrate unreservedly, the reality is that most people have significant questions around the very possibility of living into extreme old age.

I want to ask those present two straightforward questions. The first is “Who amongst us has as one of their life ambitions to live into extreme old age?” The second is to ask “Who amongst us has as their ambition to live in an Old People’s Home?” I suspect your answers will not be too different from any other gathering.

It seems to me to be a profoundly theological issue for people of faith, in that, in effect, we are showing a reluctance to accept a gift from God! In one of the stories included in our book *God, Me and Being Very Old* (SCM 2013), we read,

¹ Herbert Anderson & Keith Albans (2018): The promise and peril of finite forever: the paradox of ageing, *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging*, DOI: 10.1080/15528030.2018.1476281

“Towards the end of her life Winnie was tired and used to pray every night that God would take her, almost to the point of being disappointed when she awoke in the morning!” In thinking about paradoxes and promises, I think that we have to take Winnie’s prayer seriously.

For many societies, the story of the 20th century is one of the general lengthening of the life span. Comparing the average life expectancy in 1900 with that of 100 years later shows that for the majority of the developing world that average has almost doubled. Ann Morisy is correct though in reminding us that much of the expansion hasn't come by adding a new fourth age on to the end of a long life, but rather through the emergence of a new third age covering the period from the end of one’s working career through active ageing of the many people well into their 80s. For these reasons the story of the 20th century and indeed the beginnings of the 21st century isn't simply one of the celebration of ageing but it has to be seen in terms of the emergence of a new story of ageing.

The thing that frightens me is that we now have a situation where scientists are apparently working on things which are aimed at extending old age even further. Some claim the first person who will live to be 200 is alive today – I have also heard people claim that the first person to live to be 1000 may already exist, although I also know around 1000 people who question why they might be bothering!

Where does Winnie’s prayer sit in this kind of world? Or to bring it closer to home, how do we cope with my Mother’s reaction to a fact that emerged in a Conference I attended a few years ago. We were told that for the person in the UK reaching 85 today, they have on average another 7 years of life. That is quite a lot of living to be done, and my Mum was not sure she really wanted to bother – but she has now exceeded that average!

The theology of gift is not something which we often examine, except in this season of Harvest when we declare in gratitude that “All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above, then thanks the Lord, for all his love.” At the heart of the concept of gift is the fact that after the point of exchange the giver ceases to have a right of determination over the use of the gift. Anyone who has given a child a gift at Christmas knows that this can be a source of pain and even embarrassment, but the giver can do little or nothing. In later life we become more adept at avoiding the embarrassment, by finding cunning ways of disposing of the unwanted gift through a Charity shop well out of the orbit of giver! But this is not an approach open to the old as they ponder the ambiguous and unwanted gift of age.

At MHA we commissioned a piece of research from Harriet Mowat into the place and role of Chaplains within MHA’s aged care facilities. Her report contained two phrases which are relevant to my topic. The first was this: “MHA Chaplains support and build reluctant communities”. The second was: “MHA Chaplains make connections but live with the fractures.”

The idea of a reluctant community underlines the reality of the ambiguous gift of years which an increasing number of elders experience. And for all of us working in the area of residential aged care, the challenge of that reluctance and those fractures is a recurring one. In his work around the Eden Alternative, Bill Thomas has underlined the debilitating effect of what he calls the three plagues of loneliness, helplessness and boredom for those living in old people’s homes, and where those plagues are unaddressed, there can be little surprise if people remain less than enamoured at the prospect of an extended life.

Living with Limits: Finitude, Mortality, Frailty and Death

There are four words connected together that we use to acknowledge our limits. *Finitude or being finite* is one. Being finite is the condition of being

limited that defines our humanness. It is something we share with all creatures. There is a beginning and an end to life and in life there are beginnings and endings. There is nothing mysterious about being finite. When we age, we are keenly aware of being increasingly limited even while we seek to extend the life span. Being finite is from birth. But finitude is not a mystery.

Harvard physician Atul Gawande invites us to think about our *mortality* in his book *Being Mortal*. That is the second metaphor. Mortality is not mysterious either. Being mortal, Gawande suggests, “is about the struggle to cope with the constraints of our biology, with the limits set by genes and cells and flesh and bone.”(2014, p. 259) Later in the book he proposes that if being human is limited, then the role of caring professions and institutions ought to be aiding people in their struggle with those limits.” (2014, p. 260) For many older people, their awareness of mortality is sometimes articulated in terms of having been superseded, left behind, the final survivor of a large family or circle of friends.

Frailty has many meanings. Frailty balances helplessness and responsibility in human life. Despite extensions in the lifespan, the overwhelming narrative which people bring to their thinking about ageing is that of inevitable and irreversible frailty. This can be seen most clearly in the usual road sign alerting us to the presence of older people, but it is also present in most comedic depictions of ageing. Shakespeare’s 7th age “sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything” remains largely unchallenged in the usual language and imagery of ageing. Wendy Lustbader, a social worker who worked extensively with the ill and dying observes that “we have come to fear frailty more than death...Frailty coupled with abandonment has become our most dire existential dread.” (1999-2000) Little wonder therefore that the prospect of a lengthening lifespan is viewed as an ambiguous gift desired only if healthy and active ageing is guaranteed.

The ultimate limit in life is *death*. Unlike finitude, mortality, or frailty, death is finally a mystery. The wisdom of ageing is not only in valuing finitude or acknowledging mortality but embracing death in life. Paul Tillich is reported to have said this in a prayer: “Lord, help me to bring my death into my life lest death take my life from me.” That is wisdom for living. All our efforts to keep death out of life have the effect of giving death power to take living from us. The sad truth, however, is that in order to flee from death or signs of finitude or decay or aging, we flee from life and shrink from being fully alive. We long to limit our losses and be free from the anxiety of death but it is life and love that awakens in us the awareness that not everything is possible and nothing is forever.

Living with limits, whether as frailty, finitude, mortality, or death, is central to the wisdom of aging. Each of us will have our own list of things we used to do and can't do as well or at all as we grow older. Elder wisdom is grounded in the awareness that not everything is possible, and I am convinced that if the gift of extra years is to be a gift to be cherished, then it is something we need to embrace sooner rather than later – after all we are all ageing and none of us is as young as we used to be!

At the Conference in LA, Herbert Anderson told us this story:

Malcolm was taking a walk one fine day when he saw a frog on the sidewalk. He was startled to hear the frog speak. “Hey, old man, if you kiss me I will turn into a beautiful princess. I will be yours forever and we could make mad passionate love every day.” Malcolm put the frog in his jacket pocket and kept walking. “Hey, Old man, I don't think you heard me. If you kiss me, I will turn into a beautiful princess and we can make passionate love every day.” I heard you, Malcolm said, “but at my age I'd rather have a talking frog.”

Malcolm acknowledged that forever is finite. Life would be a lot simpler and ageing a lot easier if we were all a little more accepting of human finitude like

Malcolm. So let me briefly outline 6 benefits of facing finitude as we age – each of which I think can help us embrace the paradoxical gift.

Six Benefits of Facing Finitude as we Age

1 Facing Finitude includes Accepting Interdependence. In many ways, living into the reality of interdependence is **the** most important issue of our time. Living interdependently is a political, personal, ecclesial and communal struggle partly because we have been taught to be independent (and avoid dependence) at all cost. It is also challenging because acknowledging interdependence generates anxiety when we must make common cause with the strangers and depend on the competence of people we may not know or trust.

Choosing between dependence and independence is a false antithesis because all life is interdependent. Individualism will die slowly but die it must if modern societies are to survive and create safe contexts in which to live interdependently. All of us, if we are honest, can think of times when we resented the help of others – even though we needed it – because being less self-sufficient and more dependent diminished our sense of well-being. In order to fashion new narratives for ageing and becoming old, we will need to redefine neediness as a human norm.

2 Facing Finitude helps us be Comfortable with Being Dependent.

One of the challenges older individuals face is the growing awareness that they need the assistance of others – some of whom will be strangers. It is significant that we use the language of ‘independent living’ to describe facilities for the elderly but we don’t usually talk about a ‘dependent living’ facility. People move into ‘assisted living’ when they are no longer able to live ‘independently’. The ageing process would be liberated from negative stereotypes if we changed the language we use: ‘independent living’ would become more accurately ‘interdependent living’ and ‘assisted living’ would be more

accurately referred to as 'dependent living'. For individuals who have presumed to live an independent, self-sufficient existence, recognizing neediness and accepting dependence are monumental tasks at any age but particularly as we age. Activity, autonomy, independence, self-sufficiency are highly valued in the culture; passivity, dependency, neediness are not. The acceptance of finitude and frailty and human vulnerability at all stages of a life would make it easier to accept interdependent living as normative for everyone.

3 Facing Finitude Does not Eliminate the Need to Honour Agency.

While we are learning to acknowledge dependence and practice neediness, we continue to foster agency, nourishing our capacity to decide and act in ways that are appropriate to being 'of a certain age'. It is human agency that presses us to ask 'what shall I do with my life'? Agency transforms nouns into verbs; connection into connect, building into build, health into healing. The capacity to act is an essential dimension of being human until we die. Caregivers of older persons need to explore ways to foster agency so that people live as fully as possible until they die.

Having agency to take action, exercise choice, and make decisions at any stage in life depends on the recognition of others. The impulse to limit agency in the elderly under the guise of helping (sometimes referred to as *infantilizing*) is all too common, particularly among adult children who mean well when they worry about ageing parents. (Grandma on the table changing the lightbulb) One has competence and therefore agency *only if one is acknowledged as having it*. If we understand ageing as both accepting dependence and fostering agency, family, friends, and caregivers need to encourage the acceptance of needing help and 'resting-in-neediness' while at the same time advocating on behalf of agency for the elderly.

4 Facing Finitude includes continuing to make new friends, exploring new possibilities in which to invest our energies and our passions, to dream new dreams. There is always a danger in thinking of ageing only as subtraction, of doing less, being less, and not also as addition, new adventures, new friends, new commitments. The willingness to learn new things and modify what we have learned before is a process and not a possession. “Still making memories...”

Living longer provides opportunities for development. Having unfinished business in the end is the result of continuing to grow and imagining new possibilities. Sherwin Nuland has described this attitude as “finding a new receptiveness to the possibilities that may present themselves in times yet to come – possibilities conveyed in wavelengths perceptible only to those no longer young.” (2007, p.8) Incompleteness is not the enemy of faith and life: it is the norm for anyone who continues to grow and learn.

Facing our limits should not prevent us from investing with limited resources in a limited future. It’s the paradox of being alive.

5 Facing finitude means giving back what we have received.

Because we live longer, we need to learn how to live differently as we age. . Generativity, random acts of kindness that do not expect return, giving of ourselves in ways that are self-forgetful are not just the Christian way – it is necessary for human existence to continue. Here is what Arthur McGill writes: “All our lives, we are expending ourselves and in expending ourselves we are nourishing in others what we have received. The act of nourishing in others what we have received is to reflect the glory of God.” (1987, p. 75) We are brought back again and again to that central theme for Christian living: whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

How is this accomplished whether we have many possessions or few? In her book *Composing a Further life*, Mary Catherine Batson offers a simple

suggestion for how we might practice what she calls *active wisdom*. Here is how Batson describes it: “Active wisdom means the ability and willingness to contribute to society by putting a lifetime pattern of experience and reflect to work – often, above all, by listening.” (2010, p.243)

To be wise is to know that there is more to learn and therefore we need to be open to new learning. But the willingness to modify what has been learned in the past is a process and not a possession. We receive wisdom but it is not for us to keep or accumulate. We hold it only long enough to give it away. For that reason, generosity is a core characteristic of being wise.

6 One final benefit of facing finitude is more economic and social than personal or spiritual. If we could acknowledge human limits and accept that not everything is possible, we would reduce the excessive amount of money that is spent in the last 6 months of life and along the way avoid bankrupting our health care system. In the USA, Care for the last year of life consumes **a quarter** of Medicare’s budget. Despite all this cost, patients don’t die in the manner they prefer. In the United Kingdom, there have been many royal commissions and parliamentary enquiries about how aged care will be paid for, but each time a possible solution or way forward is outlined it gets kicked into the political long grass. It is deemed too difficult or politically unpalatable, and as a consequence we run the risk of more care providers going out of business; thereby reducing the provision of care at a time of increasing numbers of older people, and also we will see a greater divide between the wealthy and the poor, as those without their own resources receive poor care in inadequate surroundings.

There is often an internal debate among older persons themselves as to why they or their family are spending between £30,000 and £50,000 a year keeping them alive. In the worst cases they are made to feel that they are “spending

the kids' inheritance", but even when that does not apply, many do not feel happy that these sums of money are being spent, and feel that somehow they are to be seen as a burden.

Conclusion

Preparation for growing older takes a lifetime. It includes acknowledging that we are finite creatures even when we think we are not. We get ready for ageing whenever we embrace dependence and vulnerability and frailty as fully human. We are more prepared for growing older when we embrace willingly the passivities, small and large, that remind us that we undergo life as much as we undergo death. The Swiss theologian Paul Tournier once posed a question that each of us must answer : "How can the person who has seen a meaning in life also see a meaning in old age, which seems to him or her to be a diminution, an amputation, a stifling of life?" (1972, p. 190) However we formulate an answer, if we have not addressed the question before we are growing older, then it is probably too late.

In the Preface to her book *The Warmth of the Heart Prevents your Body from Rusting – Ageing without Growing Old*, Marie de Hennezel sets out a bold agenda for the 'baby boomers'. "It's up to us to invent a new art of growing old – which is a paradox, since it means accepting the inevitability of ageing without becoming 'old'." (2011, p. 2) She challenges us to come up with a new art of growing old as she writes:

"I have the feeling that the future is bound to be less sombre than we think. We will grow old for longer, but in a better way....We still have to construct a more positive image of this time of life, confront our fears in order to overcome them, and work out a real policy for preventing unhappy old age. Lastly, it is up to us to combat the denial of old age and death, by working at growing old." (2011, p. 49)

It is a necessary task that recognizes becoming old as part of ageing because we live in a era of extraordinary medical and geriatric breakthroughs. Working at embracing finitude, facing frailty, being mortal, and 'bringing death into one's life' in the same way we work at staying fit and healthy, mobile and connected will aid the process of ageing and becoming old. That is hard work partly because it is counter-cultural.

Is there a reason for longer life? If we say that lengthening the life span corresponds to the purposes of God, what unique opportunities and challenges accompany longer life? The whole of a life, including growing old, is gift to be received with gratitude and worked on with courage. In Christian language, life-long discipleship turns to long-life discipleship.

Unwanted gift? The ageing will be our guides and teach us how to embrace growing older if we listen to them. After some prompting, Miriam was delighted to reveal what she asked for on her 105th birthday.

'I've asked for a Kindle! I read a lot, they're light, and even if I don't get a lot of use of it, someone else will when I'm gone!'

Miriam embodies a wisdom of ageing from which we might all learn. She was still learning, aware that forever is finite, willing to give back what she does not need, willing to embrace the next surprise, but sitting lightly in her mortality. If we listen, ageing persons will teach us how to accept the gift of years with all of its ambiguity and paradox and pass it on.