

Thinking Allowed

Beautiful Old Age

“Those were the days my friend” goes the song. Memories of joy, pain, sadness, regret. Now I am 80 I have 8 decades to mull over, which I like. So what is it like to be old? Well, it’s personal and individual. Decline of one sort or another is inevitable. There comes the realisation that ‘I cannot do that any more’, so for me it is how I accept that or not. Changing habits and patterns is helpful, changing expectations, thinking how lucky I have been and still am.

Fear of loss of control is the most difficult area of thought to overcome. Loss of hearing, sight, mobility - Dementia probably the most feared - but I do know of people who have been happy in that condition. So for me the best policy is to enjoy each day and live in the moment as far as possible. Most of us look back at our own parents in old age, and if we were lucky can think: well, that’s not so bad.

They say old age is not for the faint hearted, but today was a beautiful day and that’s good enough for me.

Jim Horrobin

Can old age be beautiful?

Who defines old age? Is it, for example, the state giving us a pension at a certain age? Are we defined by others? Is the age that we are the age that we feel? Recognising that there are events beyond our control, should we not be the subjects of our lives rather than the objects?

Does the way we view time change as we get older? The world wants us to measure time chronologically, by the clock. ‘I’m getting on in years, I’m not sure how much longer I have,’ we may say. But when we get older, we may tend to measure time by experiences, by relationships and enjoy them as fully as we can.

Thankfulness is particularly important in older age – it is important throughout all life. Thankfulness for people and situations from the past. Thankfulness for the present and for the ways we are loved. Older age is also a time when we can come terms

with the pains and disappointments of the past, trying not to let them overshadow our present and future.

Is it the case that accepting the reality of death frees us up to live? We are aware, more than we are when we are younger, that each day could be our last. We have a choice. Either we live dominated by this thought which can cast a shadow over what we do and how we think or we accept this reality, be thankful for each day and live.

Shakespeare in *As you like it* describes old age as the seventh age of man:

*Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.*

Psalm 90 is not very encouraging:

*The days of our life are three score years and ten
Or if our strength endures, even four score.
Yet the sum of them is but labour and sorrow,
For they soon pass away and we are gone.*

Older age can bring serious health challenges. Can we continue to be thankful as we struggle with and through them?

Does older age confer specific characteristics? Just as youth can confer energy and the belief that we can change the world, adulthood can confer strength and the experience of working with others, what does old age confer? Should age qualify or disqualify people for certain tasks? Think of political and religious leaders such as American presidents and Popes.

Some cultures revere the elderly – is this so in the West or can the elderly feel they are treated like expensive inconveniences?

What is the relationship between our later and earlier years? The following quote from Simone de Beauvoir, a pioneering French writer, asks this question:

Growing, ripening, aging, dying — the passing of time is predestined, inevitable.

There is only one solution if old age is not to be an absurd parody of our former life, and that is to go on pursuing ends that give our existence a meaning — devotion to individuals, to groups or to causes, social, political, intellectual or creative work... In old age we should wish still to have passions strong enough to prevent us turning in on ourselves. One's life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation, compassion – Simone de Beauvoir

So, can old age be beautiful?

Brian Castle

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