

Ageing and PFG's.

The 'Velveteen Rabbit' is a children's book written by Margaret Margery, first published in 1922. It tells the story of a stuffed rabbit's desire to become real, through the love of it's owner. In an encounter with another toy, the Rabbit learns a challenging lesson for a youngster.

"Becoming real doesn't happen all at once,' said the Skin Horse. 'It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

By the time we reach old age (however we define that stage of life), it is likely that we have become 'real', and to have got there will have cost us some thard work and tears but left us with wonderful memories and an appreciative heart.

Ageing is something we observe in every person, including babies and children. In the first few weeks of a babie's life, amazing changes take place, and if we don't see children we know well for even two years, we note great changes. We usually refer to this as 'growing'. Look at a photo from five years ago or at a recent stage of your life, and you yourself or someone else will comment, 'you are ageing'!

Some people try to avoid ageing by the way they look or behave. This is noticable among celebrities. But as the years go by, our capacities weaken and diminish, our body shape changes and there are other changes that are difficult to hide from others. Some people are outstandingly fit at age ninety, but not when compared with when they were thirty! Ageing can be gentle, difficult, painful or cruel, just like adolescence can be. It is a stage in the journey of life.

No one can really tell us what age defines 'old' or 'aged'. Since 1908 a person must have reached 65 years of age to receive an Australian pension, although this will begin to raise (by six months) in July this year, until it reaches 67. Adjustments have been made, but it is clear that one hundred years ago, 65 was considered 'old'. There are some markers we can use to describe 'growing old'. Retirement is clearly one of these, and whilst there was a trend twenty years ago to retire 'early', increasingly, more people are working until age seventy.

By that time, most people will have begun to experience diminished faculties. Over the next decade and beyond, many will be faced with the need or option to live in more suitable accommodation (smaller, less maintenance etc), if not in an aged care facility.

They may experience pressure from their own children to consider these options. Some by this stage will be living alone following the death of their spouse. They will often be separated from their children who may live a long distance away. They will have experienced the challenges associated with losing independence, the very thing they fought so hard to acquire as a teenager or young adult!

In the past twenty years far more older people have been actively involved in grand-parenting to support their children. This can be a happy bind. They love spending time with their grandchildren, but it can become restricting of time and it can be very tiring. As people enter old age they are more likely to begin reflecting on 'what was', what is now and the what ifs of their life.

It is normal that eyesight fades, hearing and memory loss occur and suppleness and agility are no longer outstanding characteristics. As one advances in years, many contemporaries develop illnesses or die. Some suffer the death of a spouse. Combined with retirement from active work and the loss of some faculties, this leads to a changed sense of identity. People find themselves spending more time alone or at medical centres, they experience the effects of increased physical frailty, and admit or not, it does require more effort to tie shoe laces or cut toenails! It takes longer to recover from sore muscles and so they quietly mutter, "I'm getting old"!

In other severe cases, marriage partners face the challenges of dementia or other serious illnesses, and while one can be a support for the other, there are times when both are in need of assistance. Making decisions with and for one another is very painful and often conversations about this are avoided. Family members can either help or frustrate these delicate negotiations, depending on their communication skills.

Humanity everywhere is *ageing*, but especially in the developed world. In 1900 less than 1% of people were 65 years or older. In 1992 this had risen to 6.2% and in 2016 to 8%. It is expected that by 2050, more than 16% will be 65 or older and only 7.2% will be under 5!

In 2015, for the first time as far as is known, that there were more people alive over 65 years of age than under 5 years of age.

When life expectancy statistics are given, they can be misleading because they include infant deaths, and those killed by war, plagues and famine. Throughout history, if people survived to 21 years of age they could expect to live to their mid 60's and of course many lived to be much older. Psalm 90 suggests, "our days may come to 70 years, or 80, if our strength endures".

Before the mid-19th century, almost one third of children, born in any given year, died before their first birthday. Childbirth was hazardous and mortality among pregnant women was high. Only a small segment of the population lived long enough to face the physical deterioration and diseases of old age. If we ignore infant deaths, it is believed that it was common to expect to live to age 25 in the days of the Roman Empire, to 45 years of age in 1900, to 66 years of age in 1960 and to 81 years in 2017.

Around the world there have been incredible improvements in medicine that have allowed people to live longer. Sanitation, hygiene, diet and workplace safety have contributed along with a huge reduction in smoking. In the 20th century, as mentioned above, average life expectancy went from 45 years to 75 years, (and seventeen years later, it is now 80 years of age!)

During this time, the risk of death from infectious and parasitic diseases diminished. Degenerative diseases associated with ageing, such as heart disease, stroke and cancer, become more critical and medical advances have enabled millions of people with these conditions to have much longer lives than would have been the case fifty years ago.

At various time throughout history, disease has killed millions of people and infected millions more. It is estimated that there were 75,000,000 deaths caused by the Black Plague in the 14th century. 70,000,000 died in the great Influenza of 1918-1919 which coincided with the end of World War 1. It is estimated that 300,000,000 people died from smallpox in the 20th Century, that 100,000,000 died from malaria between 1900-1950 and 35,000,000 have died from HIV/AIDS. Diabetes has been and remains a huge killer, and there is great hope of a breakthrough that would save millions of lives each year.

Today, of those who live to 60, 90% survive past 65 and 66% live past 85 years of age. This means more and more people will experience the physical, mental and social changes that come with ageing. These changes include not being as strong or as able as we were previously. We may feel less attractive or less useful. One woman recently said, "I've become an observer of the family; I've lost my place of importance and relevance."

There are physical changes. Hair thins and become grey. Many males confront receding hairlines and baldness. The proportion of body fat tends to increase with age. Skin thins, wrinkles, dries and readily reveals bruises. Hearing capacity diminishes after age 55, and 20/20 vision declines. For women, changes in hormonal function lead to menopause. The ending of the menstrual cycle, accompanied by loss of fertility, typically occurs between age 47 and 51. Reactions vary greatly, and most experience stressful 'temperature changes' and mood swings. In our youth-worshipping culture, these changes have the effect of leading people to see themselves as less attractive. We have less mobility and more effort is needed to get up and down. Our muscles are weaker. Conversations are often more about ailments or the repetition of stories.

St John records Jesus as saying to Peter, *I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.*" (John 21:18)

A steady decline in the number of active brain cells is normal, but senility is an abnormal deterioration in mental faculties (about 5% of people over 65). Decrease in efficiency of long-term memory shows up in some people after age 55. But forgetfulness is often due to lack of interest or concentration rather than memory failure or old age.

Learning, solving problems, retrieving memories and processing information decline with age, however, many people remain capable of great intellectual achievements (writers, lecturers, researchers etc). Agatha Christie continued to write mysteries in her 80s. David Attenborough will be 91 in May. Spanish classical guitarist Andres Segovia continued to give concerts in his 90's. George Bush Snr celebrated his 90th birthday with a skydive. South African Mohr Keet, bungee jumped at age 96! Miguel Angel Cruz was born in Puerto Rico and lives now in the US. He is 104. He drives, plays pool, jogs, does his own laundry, and is on Facebook!

Leaving a role or position of influence can be difficult. Some experience feeling like a 'has been' or 'nobody' after retirement. The question Who am I? emerges again. Am I or have I been more the 'role' than the person? Maturity is accepting that personal worth is internal – if you are loved for that, the externals can change and it makes no difference. You have become real!

Who I am is not what I do, nor what I used to be or what profession I had. I am who I was, as well as who I am now, and importantly how I am me. If we have not learned this lesson in the earlier stages of life (adolescence or mid-life) we have to learn it in aged years or we will struggle with a sense of meaning and personal worth.

Social disengagement a gradual turning inward and withdrawing psychologically and socially is quite common in old age, although it is not inevitable. It is often imposed on older people by their own physical limitations or by society ignoring them as 'has beens'. Living alone or having few connections with people, contributes to a sense of isolation. Elderly people who keep active tend to be more satisfied than those who don't.

The Chinese use two characters for the word crisis. These characters mean danger and opportunity. There are at least three crisis periods throughout the ageing process, Adolescence (15-22; Mid-life 38-45) and Old Age (after 65). These ages are just guidelines for the period of time when people have to negotiate a significant change of identity including physical, emotional and spiritual, as well as adjusting to independence or dependence and changing relationships. When a lobster is regrowing its shell, its body remains raw and vulnerable until the new shell is formed. Many people experience something similar – raw and painful feelings, as they adjust.

During these various stages, a crisis (danger and opportunity) is often triggered by an event typical of the stage. For an adolescent it could be rejection from a friend, the break up of one's parents marriage, the uncomfortableness of rapid physical changes etc.. These events invite the young person to reflect on 'Who am I? In seeking an answer they are likely to compare themselves with others, and focus on what they lack. Mark Twain's advice is helpful. "*Whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority, it is time to pause and reflect*". At this age, young people are also beginning to seek direction for their life in terms of a future occupation, so that too, is a big question and cause for reflection.

In mid-life it could be losing a job or a significant relationship, the death of a parent etc. These events are viewed in the context that life is already 'half-over', so a person can feel some urgency to make the second half of life better than the first. In 'old age' it could be any of the issues we have already mentioned and again, these cause a review of how one wants to live the remaining years.

Erik Erikson describes the psychosocial developmental task of old age as: Integrity versus despair. A person at this age reflects more critically on the meaning and value of their life, and it is important to avoid dwelling on the mistakes of the past or on one's imminent death. This crisis involves finding meaning and satisfaction in one's life, rather than wallowing in bitterness and resentment.

Some people are unable to accept the value and meaning of their life. They ask, has it been worthwhile? Is it worthwhile now? The questions that might have been avoided once, now cannot be avoided. Regret, shame and depression can take over. This is what Erikson called despair. It is important to avoid dwelling on regrets or mistakes of the past and becoming bitter and resentful ('become better, not bitter'). It is important to find meaning, contentment and satisfaction in one's life now, not just the past and not just the grandchildren! The phrase "Do not be afraid" appears 365 times in the pages of the bible, so this can offer comfort.

It is often said that what you are, will be exaggerated or heightened in old age. A cranky old man was probably always short tempered and critical! A happy outgoing old lady was probably always a good mixer.

Integrity is the deep sense of assurance that our life has had meaning. Whatever has happened in our life is a mixture of good and bad, and the intrusion of all kinds of people and events that will have affected us greatly. It is necessary to accept and forgive ourselves – and our parents. No matter what cards life has dealt us, our life has had meaning and dignity. From a faith point of view, we are called to join with St Paul in expressing confidence that whatever has happened, God will turn to good.

There are many songs that capture the range of experiences from integrity to despair. Roy Clarke wrote 'Yesterday When I was Young' .*"There are so many songs in me that won't be sung, I feel the bitter taste of tears upon my tongue. The time has come for me to pay for yesterday when I was young"* .

Bergman, Bergman and Hamlich wrote 'The Way We Were'. *"Can it be that it was all so simple then, or has time rewritten every line and if we had the chance to do it all again, tell me, would we, could we? Memories may be beautiful and yet, what's too painful to remember, we simply choose to forget. So it's the laughter we will remember, whenever we remember, the way we were"*.

John Lennon wrote, 'In My Life' *"And these memories lose their meaning when I think of love as something new. Though I know I'll never lose affection for people and things that went before, I know I'll often stop and think about them. In my life, I love you more"*

There are many possible responses to the issues of ageing, and questions we ask ourselves. Who decides you are old? Who decides you might be a risk? Who starts giving you advice? There are challenges of independence from now adult children. To these issues and questions there is no simple answer. Many have been through these same or similar issues with their own parents. In fact there are many aged people who have aged parents still alive!

"The older I get, the less I know (or the less sure I am) about more things" Do you sense this is true for you? It seems that this is 'the getting of wisdom'. One of the most famous quotes attributed to Mark Twain (presumably as a persona in a novel since his own father died when he was eleven) is that, *"when I was seventeen my father seemed to know so little. I was surprised by the time I reached twenty-one, how much he had learned"*.

Wisdom brings inner peace and a willingness to keep living life and giving to others. It sees life in simple terms, as so many of the ancient proverbs of any culture reflect (e.g. *"Show me his friends, and I'll show you the man"*; *"A blind person who sees is better than a seeing man who is blind"*). Erikson suggested that *"Healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough to not fear death."* Victor Hugo wrote, *"Have courage for the great sorrows of life and patience for the small ones. And when you have laboriously accomplished your daily task go to sleep in peace. God is awake."*

Carl Jung, the Swiss-German psychoanalyst suggested that *"we are spiritual beings having a human experience"*. We are capable of living from the heart with great spiritual awareness and contentment. He identified four stages of life that have to do with who we are as people and our motivations, and throughout our lives, we often move forward and backward from these stages. He chose images to explain them.

Jung claimed, *“we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life’s morning, for what was great in the morning will be little at evening and what in the morning was true, at evening will have become a lie.”*

1. Athletic (looks; image).

This is the least mature stage and it is when people are most self-absorbed. Some never make it out of this phase, or often revert to it. It is characterized by being obsessed with physical appearance.

2. The Warrior (achieving, defeating)

This is the stage when we begin to take on responsibilities and become goal oriented, maybe forming a desire to ‘conquer the world’. Achieving these objectives becomes more important than the vanity of the athletic stage. It is normal to encounter during this stage the various struggles that early adulthood brings. It is a stage that people often revert to throughout their lives as they reinvent themselves.

The Statement (making a difference)

Taking up this stage is often prompted by asking ourselves, “what have I done for others?” One’s focus shifts from personal achievements to reaching out and helping others. This can begin with the experience of parenting when one wants the best for one’s children, and making the necessary sacrifices to provide what is needed to do that.

The statement stage is about leaving a legacy or a footprint in life, and considering how one can continue moving forward, not just for oneself, but for the other people in one’s life. As far as maturity goes, the statement phase is a huge step forward from the warrior phase.

The Spirit (letting go)

The fourth stage, is the spirit stage, when a person realizes that he or she is more than what has been accumulated (wealth, friends, possessions, achievements, good deeds, or milestones). We are spiritual beings and during this stage, Jung suggests that we realize that we are divine beings in a journey of life that has no real beginning and no end. The spirit phase is characterized by a sense of “getting out of your own mind” and focusing on what is waiting beyond one’s physical being.

The philosopher Lao Tzu proposed a question over 2,500 years ago that describes the spirit phase: *“Can you step back from your own mind and so understand all things?”*

Giving birth and nourishing, having without possessing, acting with no expectations, leading and not trying to control: this is the supreme virtue.”

Some people can never comprehend the meaning of this. Those who do understand, seek and even yearn for this stage of life. To reach this stage, one probably has to have ‘most of one’s hair loved off, eyes dropped out and joints loose and very shabby’!

We have thirty-five more living years than most generations or cultures have known. What do we want to do with those extra years? We often complain of being busy and lacking time, but we have been given far more time than most people who have ever lived.

What do we need, to be our best self? Where do PFG’s fit in? Our involvement in PFG’s has been one of giving and receiving, of belonging, companionship; a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood; acceptance, belonging; caring and being cared for; celebrating; practical Christian living. We have seen others get older and become more frail, lose their spouse, face decisions about aged care, thrive during retirement, travel more than ever, volunteer in the parish or community and so much more.

Although most PFG’s are comprised of members who have been together for more than 20 years, not everyone in a PFG is old or aged. How can the older support the younger? What can they expect if there are younger families in their group or in other PFG’s?

There are other questions worth reflecting on and perhaps sharing at a PFG function.

1. Who is someone from your PFG you admire because of how they have aged?
2. Is there someone else you personally know who you admire for the same reason?
3. What can we learn about ageing and living our lives well?
4. How can our PFG’s rejoice in ageing?

To conclude, here are the Beatitudes for the Ageing.

Blessed are they who understand,
my faltering steps and shaking hand.

Blessed who know my ears today,
must strain to catch the things they say.

Blessed are they who look away,
when tea is spilled on the cloth that day

Blessed are they with a cheery smile
who stop to chat for a little while

Blessed are they who never say,
you've told that story twice today.

Blessed are they who make it known
that I'm loved, respected, and not alone.

And blessed are they who ease the days
of my journey home, in loving ways

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