Philosophy for ageing

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn[1]

The enlightened but doleful predictions of the Reverend Thomas Malthus in 1798[2] have now truly come to pass. By 2050, Australia will be awash with centenarians, many requiring implants, artificial organs and even cerebral exchanges. No longer the dreary sere and yellow leaf, no longer Shakespeare's dreaded seventh age "sans teeth, sans eyes … sans everything",[3] only a fortunately placed populace intent on deferring the inevitable.

However, no matter how assiduously we follow the advice from prestigious journals, dietary manuals, exercise directives or even our favourite medical adviser, the outcome of such introspection will only secure for us a relatively limber body encasing a biologically indestructible matrix without any sustenance of soul or freedom from despair.

I would like to tender this personal approach to forfend that impending biological boredom.

Embracing gratitude and selflessness seem to me to be shields against ageing and depression. If one wakens and looks about with a sense of wonderment, curiosity and thankfulness, the outlook for the day is good. Treasured belongings and connections banish from my mind the intrusive "Poor me philosophy".

I have ceased to agree that it is awful to become old. I look into the beauty and potential dignity of ageing — the experience, knowledge, acceptance and wondrousness of it, and try to find a way of revisiting each aspect for myself.

Dylan Thomas's advice to "not go gentle into that good night" but "rage against the dying of the light"[4] no longer appeals to me. I hope that when the bell tolls I can depart with a degree of serenity that comforts those about me, making their grieving memorable, easy and thankful.

I want to remain young in mind as well as in body. I wish to relate to the young, to learn their language, to respect their culture and to understand their fears and concerns. I desire to talk with them about these things and try to think young and dress accordingly. Even though I sometimes feel a bit ridiculous, my body knows that I am not. My contacts appreciate the fact that the most formidable barrier to good relationships — disparity in ages — is of little importance to me. I am not restrained about touching or hugging or just pressing. Such acts of mutual contiguity enrich; comfort seeming to communicate better than words.

"Embracing gratitude and selflessness seem to me to be shields against ageing and depression"

Conversation infused with a genuine sense of interest and enquiry delights me, especially on buses where propinquity encourages fellow feeling. The exchange of first names is a good start to that process of communication.

I never bar any thought that comes into my mind. The good, the bad, the naughty, the painful and the pleasurable are all welcome. They are all part of me and deserve to be considered, placed in their proper perspective and integrated into my personality, which has certainly changed, hopefully matured, but become more encrusted since I first experienced them.

Although I fear memory loss, I realise that it is more often due to lack of registration and recall, obfuscated by the very medications prescribed for its relief.

Browning's Rabbi Ben Ezra is the man for me. "Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be, The last of life for which the first was made."[5]

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