

Full of Days



By Pamela Cram

Introduction

When, in the Hebrew Scriptures, characters like Abraham and Job died they were described as ‘old and full of days’. This can be understood as ‘of a great age’, but perhaps it also hints at lives that were well lived and full. Today we talk about ‘ageing successfully’ or ‘ageing well’, which doesn’t necessarily mean remaining physically active. Nor does it mean avoiding the wrinkles and grey hair.

This booklet offers some thoughts and ideas relating to age and ageing well. It’s written during the period of ‘lockdown’ in the 2020 ‘Covid 19’ pandemic.

Just a few weeks before lockdown, I took part in the ‘Ministry among Older People’ course at Cliff College near Sheffield. Being almost completely confined to home during the following weeks gave me plenty of time to read the recommended books and reflect on the issues.

I also used the time to sort through all our family and holiday photos on the computer, and to re-visit my family history, having taken a DNA test with ‘Ancestry’ not long before lockdown. So I’ve been doing some of the things that are widely seen as a ‘task’ of ageing - thinking about my ‘story’ and my family ‘story’, examining memories, recognising regrets, integrating my past into my present, finding meaning, purpose and hope.

A Prayer of John Henry Newman

Support us, O Lord,
all the day long
until the shadows lengthen,
the evening comes,
the busy world is hushed,
the fever of life is over
and our work is done.

Then in your mercy,
grant us a safe lodging,
a holy rest
and peace at the last;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Some Recommended Reading & websites:

James Woodward, Valuing Age (Pastoral Ministry with Older People) SPCK 2008—good text book for church workers, but now rather dated in a fast moving ‘field’.

James Woodward, Befriending Death, SPCK 2005—a slim volume with a lot of practical information for individuals or groups.

Harriet and Donald Mowat, The Freedom of Years, Ageing in Perspective BRF 2018—this is my favourite, very readable, informative and thought-provoking.

Joan Chittister, The Gift of Years, Growing Older Gracefully, BlueBridge 2008—40 short reflections on a variety of topics.

www.brfonline.org.uk—for Bible Reflections for Older People, by annual subscription

www.christiansonageing.org.uk—‘an ecumenical voice for older people’. Members receive quarterly magazine and 10% off publications.

www.embracingage.org.uk—aiming to link every care home in UK with a local church.

www.carehomefriends.org.uk—Bible study resources and resources for ‘Holidays at Home’

www.faithinlaterlife.org—online directory of activities for seniors

www.messychurch.org.uk—have resources for several ‘Messy Vintage’ sessions!

www.uglyducklingcompany.com—for ‘Table Talk for Fourth Agers’ a resource to help start conversations.

Well, I’m not sure I’ve done all of that yet, but I’ve made a start, and hopefully I still have a few more years to work on it!

The format of this book is that in each section I will offer a photo and the ‘story’ behind it. This will lead into some thoughts drawn from my reading on age and the news during lockdown. Then there are a few questions or suggestions.

From time to time there’ll be an interlude—a double page spread with quotations or information on a related topic, and some poetry.

What I’m offering is a kind of personal journey, drawing together the fruit of my lockdown experience. My hope is that this will be a resource for your own reflection. For some this may lead into conversations and activities, on your own or in church and community groups, which will support and nurture yourself and others.

So, enjoy reading, and may you be ‘full of days’!

Pamela Cram

I make no charge for this book, apart from printing cost and P &P if posted to you. However, I invite you to make a donation to Methodist Homes, whose voice has been heard speaking out strongly for all the care sector during the Covid 19 pandemic. Donations can be made online: www.mha.org.uk or to me at 86 Pontardawe Road, Clydach, Swansea, SA6 5PA

How Old is Old?

This photo of my great-grandma used to hang on our sitting room wall. I don't remember her, but my sister, Liz, says her memory is that 'Granny Blackwell' was always dressed in black and was always seated.



When great-grandma died Liz was told that she was 93—obviously a notable fact. She must have seemed extremely old, given that my parents would not have had any other known relative who'd reached 90 years of age, and only a couple who had attained 80.

How things have changed! In 1950 there were only about 300 centenarians in the UK. There are now over 14,000. In 2015 there were 154 people confirmed to be over 110 years old ('super-centenarians').

It used to be the case that those who retired, if they were lucky, would have a few years of retirement. Women, though living longer, were not expected to do much in older age—except sit in black (especially if widowed) and read maybe, like Granny Blackwell.

A Sonnet

The happy days of Spring are o'er once more,
And sunny days of Summer passed away,
But autumn's here in all her bright array,
In lovelier colours than e'er known before.
In field and meadow, and on hill and moor
Are colours brighter than the sun's own ray.
The fruitful grain is gathered day by day
Which for a time is safely kept in store.

But birds all fly away when Autumn's come,
No more the busy bee is heard to hum.
The wind soon leaves the lovely trees as bare,
As though the coloured leaves were never there.
And soon the snow will cover all the ground
And thus complete the ever-moving round.

Mavis Bamford (1928—2018)
written when she was aged about 14.

'Aunt Mavis' was actually my mother's cousin. Though there was a 6 year age difference, she and Mum were very close. She died just 3 months before Mum. This sonnet was found amongst her papers, and it was read at her funeral. Here she is at her graduation as a nurse—very 'Call the Midwife'!



*For everything there is a season,
and a time for every purpose under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant,
and a time to pluck up that which is
planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build
up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to cast away stones,
and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace,
and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
a time to rend, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.*

Ecclesiastes 3

More recently there's been a lot of talk about the 'Third Age'. The 'University of the Third Age' has become popular in many areas. Third-Agers are active retirees who want to continue learning, joining in groups and other activities. Some Third-Agers continue working, and the retirement age has been pushed slowly upwards.

Gerontologists (people who study us old folks!) now speak of the 'Fourth Age' - the 'older old', those who are becoming more restricted and in need of some degree of support, whether informal from families, or more formally from professional carers and care homes.

However, as we get older we generally only feel a fraction of our chronological age. So how old is old? All of us are ageing from the moment we're born, and all of us are unique individuals.

Questions and suggestions:

How old do you feel?

Check out the demographics of your area. (Local Authorities have figures for each electoral ward). In my area just over a fifth are over 65's, but in other parts of the County the figure is nearer to a third.

Bob Weighton

While I was on the course in Derbyshire we heard the news that Bob Weighton had become the oldest recorded man in the world, following the death of the then oldest in Japan. Bob was 111 and 303 days. Though physically limited he looked a lot younger than his 111 years, and continued to have an active life.

An engineer by occupation he continued to make things to sell for charity and gave considerable support to the Anna Chaplaincy movement (see page 40).

A while after we went into lockdown, Bob had his birthday—a less elaborate affair than planned perhaps, but still he appeared on television and a fuss was made.

Sadly, 10 weeks into lockdown Bob's remarkable journey ended. He died peacefully in his sleep. He had played down his great age by saying: 'I'm just an ordinary bloke who's happened to have lived a long time'.

Bob, who lived in Hampshire, was born on the same day as the UK's oldest recorded woman, who lives just along the coast at Poole. She is Joan Hocguard, nee Reynolds.



Later my parents progressed to renting, and then owning, a caravan on Gower, but Mum was still just as good at precision packing!

In the first half of life we tend to add things—new relationships, family, 'things', work etc., but in the second half of life we have to start to lose things, in the sense of 'letting go'. We learn once more to 'travel light'. Children move away. We 'down-size'. Redundancy or retirement bring a different sense of loss.

Then in later life even our own bodies start giving way and we can't do the things we used to do. Perhaps the stage comes where mobility goes, or we have to give up driving (or both), and our world shrinks. At the same time many of our contemporaries pass away. Like it or not we are travelling lighter.

The 'Covid experience' has highlighted this in many ways, but has also helped us to realise what's really important in life.

Questions / Suggestions

Desert Island Discs continues to be a popular radio programme. Guests have to travel light! What 8 discs would you choose, and why? What luxury would you ask to take? What book?

How good are you at travelling light? How well do you cope with loss?

Travelling Light

This was a really special find amongst the old photographic slides. We had no other photo of the motor-bike and sidecar in which we set off on holiday each year.

This was taken in 1958 near Lowestoft but in other years we went all the way to Cornwall in it. It's hard to imagine now how we did it—lots of questions about health and safety for a start!

What I've been wondering though is how we got all the luggage for the family into the sidecar as well. We used a basic tarpaulin as a 'tent', and presumably travelled very light otherwise.

In 1959 we graduated to a Bedford Dormobile—'Bertha'. It was only a two berth, so we usually took along a tent as well, although there was a removable bunk set up for me above the driving area at some stage. I remember Mum packing our things—like an intricate jigsaw with everything fitting tightly in the cupboards and storage boxes, as well as all around Liz and I in the back seats. We travelled around the UK in this way, as well as taking a couple of memorable trips to Scandinavia. I have another photo of 'Bertha' being hoisted onto the ship at Newcastle!



The Old Woman

As a white candle in a holy place
So is the beauty of an aged face.

As the spent radiance of the winter sun
So is a woman with her travail done.

Her brood gone from her and her
thoughts as still
As the waters under a ruined mill.

*Joseph Campbell
1879-1944*

Never too old?

I love this four generation photo. The baby is my mother. She's on her Dad's knee, with grandpa Dalton on the right, and her great-grandpa, Frederick Dalton, aged about 83, on the left. You can see the family similarity in the men's faces.



Frederick was born to a large farming family in a Leicestershire village. With 8 boys in the family, at a time when rural work was decreasing, it's not surprising that several of them emigrated. Frederick stayed most of his life in this country, trying his luck in industrial Leicester, and then as a shop-keeper, mostly in Leicester, but also in the then booming seaside resort of Rhyl for a while.

Of the Last Verses in the Book

When we for age could neither read nor write,
The subject made us able to indite.
The soul, with nobler resolutions deckt
The body stooping, does herself erect:
No mortal parts are requisite to raise
Her, that unbodied can her Maker praise.

The seas are quiet when the winds give o'er;
So calm are we when passions are no more.
For then we know how vain it was to boast
Of fleeting things, so certain to be lost.
Clouds of affection from our younger eyes
Conceal that emptiness which age despises.

The soul's dark cottage, battered and decayed,
Lets in new light through chinks that Time hath made:
Stronger by weakness, wiser, men become
As they draw near to their eternal home.
Leaving the old, both worlds at once they view
That stand upon the threshold of the new.

Edmund Waller
1606-87

Anna Chaplaincy

A few years ago the Anna Chaplaincy movement was started, a network of women and men, mostly volunteers, working among older people in the community. The name comes from a story in the Bible, where the very elderly Anna welcomes the baby Jesus and his parents in the Temple. She recognises he is the redeemer she has been waiting for.

Anna Chaplains are commissioned by local churches to reach out to those of all faiths and none, offering emotional and spiritual support to those who are 'full of days', and those who care for them.

"Our vision is to see an Anna Chaplain in every small- and medium-sized community in the country, and for the Anna Chaplain name to become synonymous with spiritual care for older people."

For more information:

www.annachaplaincy.org.uk

01865 319700

c/o Bible Reading Fellowship, 15 The Chambers,
Vineyard, Abingdon, OX14 3FE



I only recently learned that at the grand old age of 77, Frederick set off on a new adventure, emigrating to Canada to live with his daughter, Jane. As if that wasn't enough, he then made the long journey back at the age of 82, a few months before this photo was taken. He died aged 85. I really admire his entrepreneurship, and his travelling so far, at what was probably equivalent to being a 'super-centenarian' at that time!

During the Covid 19 'lockdown' Captain (soon to be Sir) Tom Moore, aged nearly 100, became a 'national treasure' as he walked up and down his garden raising millions of pounds for charity. Other 'Fourth-Agers' were inspired by this to do similar things, proving that age is not a hindrance, and that it's possible to transcend the body's physical limitations.

Hopefully this will contribute to a growing recognition that just because someone is 'old' doesn't mean they can't contribute to society and achieve great things.

Questions / Suggestions

You might like to check out the campaign against ageism run by the Older Person's Commissioner for Wales—or other similar campaigns.

Do you feel that you've been discriminated against because of your age? What about that 70 year marker for Covid vulnerability, irrespective of health and fitness?

There is no old age.
There is, as there always
was, just you.
Carol Matthau 2003

We can't know what led to these events, although we can guess that the separation of Mum's parents around the same time was a factor, as would be the difficulty of managing a young man, who possibly was beginning to be aggressive in his frustration. There was, of course, no understanding nor support for such children in the 1920's and 30's. We don't even know what his problem was—like so many he was described as an imbecile, and most of the records were destroyed.

Show a people as one thing,
as only one thing, and that
is what they become.....the
single story robs people of
dignity.

Chimamanda Adichie

These are events external to ourselves which do cause regret and distress, of course, and need to be thought through, but what about our own actions and experiences. Part of the 'task' of ageing is to assess our own past, recognising our regrets and faults; acknowledging where we have hurt or been hurt; and coming to terms with these. Perhaps, it might involve forgiving (ourselves as well as others) and if possible being reconciled, or at least finding personal peace.

Questions / Suggestions

Where are the points of regret in your life or your family history?

What has brought 'light' in your personal story, and what has brought 'darkness'?

Is there anything that might help you in assessing the past in a balanced way. Perhaps creative writing, or speaking to a friend, councillor or pastor?

53% of adults agree that once you reach old age people tend to treat you as a child.

Assessing the Past

As I'm writing this, controversy is raging about monuments linked to the slave trade in the U.K. and U.S.A. following the toppling of the Colston monument in Bristol. The descendants of some of those commemorated are saying that they agree with the re-assessment, if not the removal, of the statues. Others are calling for a more measured examination, recognising that, as Dylan Thomas puts it in Eli Jenkins' prayer: 'We are not wholly bad or good'.

At this time last year, my husband and I made a journey through Lincolnshire and northwards visiting friends, and taking in places significant to his family history. We had learned, not long before, some shocking news about an uncle of Alan's. His mother's brother Francis had some kind of learning difficulties. Mum went away to boarding school at 11. Soon after she was told that her brother had died aged 13. However, in my research I discovered that he hadn't. In 1939 he was in an institution in Yorkshire where he died aged 28, probably from the effects of the toxic mix of drugs used to calm inmates.

After much searching in Easingwold cemetery we found this small stone memorial, half buried.



The Welsh Declaration of the Rights of Older People

- * I have the right to be who I am.
- * I have the right to be valued.
- * I have free will and the right to make decisions.
- * I have the right to decide where I live, how I live, and with whom I live.
- * I have the right to work, develop, participate and contribute.
- * I have a right to safety, security and justice.

The Ageing Brain

I don't think our parents ever did four generations photos, and neither did we with our boys. The age of remaining grandparents, and geographical distance, gave very small windows of opportunity, so it just didn't happen. However we have done them with our first grandchild, Euan. Here he is with our son Julian, myself and my Mum. Euan is now 14, and sadly Mum is no longer with us.



A few years ago when I muttered to Julian about forgetting what I'd gone upstairs for, he said: 'Oh, I do that too'. I found this encouraging as he was in his early 30's at the time. Maybe it wasn't about age after all. I've now learned that these memory issues are indeed not a matter of age.

It is a fact that in the 'pre Covid world' the vast majority of volunteers were retirees, who felt they had time to give, and were keen to use skills gained in their working lives in their community. Especially if retiring early, volunteering meets the need for the older person to keep active, physically and mentally. During the pandemic many of these volunteers had to step aside, and many younger people were recruited to support the isolated and those struggling financially. Time will tell whether the volunteer profile will change back post Covid.

It's important for all volunteers to feel valued, enabled and supported, but perhaps this is especially so for those 'full of days'. When tiredness, aches and pains set in, that little bit of encouragement can keep them going. Flexibility and regular contact are also important, allowing for breaks from volunteering if needed.

Questions / Suggestions:

What skills and knowledge do you have which might be of value to your local church or project?

Do you have time to offer, or are you doing too much?

How might volunteers in the organisations you're involved in be better valued and kept informed?

Volunteering

I'm writing this page during Volunteers' Week. At our local community project, Ty Croeso, we run a branch of the Swansea Foodbank. This is a picture of some of our first group of volunteers in 2012.



Since this was taken a few have had to withdraw due to health problems, but it was only with Covid 19 that we realised the age of most of our volunteers! With a number of them over 70, and others, though younger, living with 'underlying health problems', the team was suddenly depleted. Fortunately, we have been able to continue the Foodbank service, with just two volunteers (socially distanced). However, it means there's less time to chat to visitors, and, of course, we can't provide a cuppa given the regulations.

One session of the course I attended just before lockdown considered the particular needs of 'older' volunteers. Of course, the benefits of volunteering were highlighted—a sense of purpose, a reason to go out, boosted self-esteem and confidence, good company.

As life expectancy has increased, dementia has become a health issue, and is something that scares us all as we get older. Joking about forgetfulness is maybe a 'cover' for our fears. The fact is that roughly 1 in 14 over 65's get dementia—which means 13 in 14 don't, of course!

It's only since dementia emerged on the scene that serious study of the ageing brain has taken place. It's now understood that while the brain does shrink with age, generally cognitive ability remains the same. We may get a little slower at doing things, but may actually get better at some skills such as reflection,

My Mum never suffered from dementia, and remained fairly agile mentally until her final few years when her 'diagnosis' was that bits of the brain were just slowly switching off.

One thing I regret is not having asked my parents and grandparents more questions about their 'story', and who was on all those photos in the drawer!.

Questions/ Suggestions

Spend a bit of time writing on the back of photos who people are—or label those electronically stored ones.

If you have older relatives encourage them to tell their stories.

Knowledge and Wisdom

I have two copies of this photo, from around 1933, in the 'family archive'. Apart from the fact that the boy is my Dad, I know little else for certain! I discovered where the photo is taken. A clue is that there's a famous structure just off to the right! (Answer on p. 16!)



The lady in the middle is either my grandmother, May, or her sister, Ivy, but I have no idea who the taller lady is. I assume that the photographer is May or Ivy, on the basis that my grandpa died of TB in 1932 and Dad was brought up in an all female household—May, Ivy and 'Granny Blackwell' (see page 4)

I'm aware of some of the ways in which the loss of his Dad, and being in a household of women, at least one of whom was quite a force to be reckoned with, influenced Dad's, life, attitudes and behaviours.

Carers UK is a charity which:

- ◆ Provides a helpline;
- ◆ Links carers to one another for mutual support;
- ◆ Offers help and advice;
- ◆ Campaigns on behalf of carers;
- ◆ Work with local authorities and others to provide services for carers.



Find them at www.carersuk.org
20 Great Dover Street, London SE1 4LX
020 7378 4999



There are about 700,000 people caring for relatives with dementia, and the care they give is estimated to be worth nearly £14million. Dementia Carers UK offers several training courses, and provides support.

Find them at www.dementiacarers.org.uk
7-14 Great Dover Street, London SE1 4YR
020 3096 7894

"Throughout my life Mum's been there to look after me; even after I got married she was around to help me and support us. Now the tables have turned and it's my turn to look after her."

Carers UK

Across the UK there are 6.5 million carers.

That's 1 in 8 adults who care for a relative who is older, disabled, or long-term ill.

Of course, we're all shaped by our experiences, good and bad. As a trained counsellor I'm particularly aware of that, and know that not everyone is able to face up to their past. I often wonder if Dad would have been able to do so had he not died suddenly at the age of 67. One of my greatest regrets is that he died just as I was coming to terms with some aspects of my relationship with him, and hoping to have the opportunity to become closer to him.

Typically, in the photo my Dad is carrying a rather large book. He always read a lot, enjoying keeping up to date with scientific developments. He attended a prestigious Grammar School in his home town, I assume on a scholarship. He then studied pharmacy in Leicester (where he met my Mum). He certainly had a lot of knowledge on various topics, but there is some evidence that in certain areas he lacked a bit of wisdom!

Wisdom is something that those 'full of days' have to offer to the world as they reflect on their store of knowledge and experience.

Questions/Suggestions

Who would you say is a really knowledgeable person? And who do you see as a really wise person?

Find out about 'The Elders' - a group of former world leaders who share their expertise and are influencers, working for justice and peace.

"... the grey hair of experience is the splendour of the old."

- Proverbs 20:29, New Living Translation

In youth we learn, in age we understand.

Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach
at age of 75

We are the culmination of all we have become.

Anthony Reddie

(They're on Blackpool Pier.)

Over a number of years, while I was supporting Mum in her own home and then in a care home, my aunt was carer for Mum's brother. There were many phone calls where we shared the difficulties of our situations and the concerns for our loved ones—as well as becoming the conduit for messages between brother and sister.

There are already many older people who are carers for parents, spouses and children. Their numbers are going to increase, and particularly concerning is the number of people who will have care responsibilities into their 80's (or older). I already know one person of that age caring for a mother who is over 100. Others may be caring for children with disabilities, or spouses with dementia. These are challenging situations for people of any age, but especially so in older age.

Questions / Suggestions

Who do you know who has responsibility of care for another? There are stresses whether it's supporting the individual to stay in their own home; managing finances as a power of attorney; or being a carer for a relative at home 24/7.

Can you enter into conversation with someone in this situation? Ask if there's anything that would help? Maybe just being at the end of a phone is help in itself, as it was for my aunt and myself.

If you're a carer don't be afraid to ask for help!

Caring

In lockdown during the Covid crisis, older people needed the support of family members to shop for them, and yet we couldn't meet as families across different households, and missed one another's company. For others family became a difficult concept, as the stresses of being thrown together took their toll.

In this picture from a Christmas in the early 1960's my maternal-Granny is enjoying the festivities with us. She lived nearby. Many of my early memories are



of time spent with her. Food seems to feature a lot in those memories—battenburg cake, crumpets cooked on an open fire, baked apples with lots of golden syrup, and the 3 sweets I was allowed to have from her sweet tin as I left for home!

In this image Granny would have been about the age I am now, active and independent. Later, when she became ill, my parents took her in for a while, but it didn't work well. So my mother always said she didn't want my sister or I to take her in when the time came.

So What's the Story?

In 2019 Barbara Glasson and Clive Marsh, President and Vice-President of the Methodist Church for the following year, chose as their theme, 'So what's the story?'. They prepared a book about story-telling in the Bible and in our own lives.

In their concluding chapters they talk about the importance of telling our own stories, to ourselves and to each other, and doing so creatively. To help us along the way they suggest a few questions:

- What has helped you to grow?
- What has been limiting or damaging?
- What influences have made you who you are?
- Where have you found meaning?

Pass it on!

Two of our grandchildren live in Scotland (we are in Wales). We make an effort to see them regularly. Lockdown prevented their usual holiday with us in the spring. My relatively new smartphone came in handy to contact them on 'What's Ap', hear Euan drumming, and see Leila's artistic and craft work.

Our other grand-daughter, Sofia, lives locally and we have, like many grand-parents, helped with childcare since she was born six years ago. In the pre Covid world she came for sleepovers, and visited a couple of times a week. She loves spending time in the garden with 'Tadcu' (grandpa in Welsh). They share all sorts of games of imagination, explore the natural world, pick fruit, and plant things.

Sometimes Sofia and I
bake or do some sewing,
She says she wants me
to teach her to play the
piano.

Of course, none of this
has been possible during
lockdown, and we've all
missed the fun, even if
sometimes we're ex-
hausted after her visits!



18

The waters calmed,
we smoothly completed the bedtime ablutions
to the happy strains of shared laughter and song.
Settled in her chair, with goonie on,
cup of tea and biscuit beside her,
for more singing, or perhaps reminiscing,
over photos of places in Edinburgh
that she had known, and loved.

And I drove home with a big smile on my face,
knowing that I had helped her to remember
who she used to be, and still is.

♦

Notes from Maggie

- ♦ The Skye Boat song is a late 19th century Scottish song about Bonnie Prince Charlie. It was a song we loved to sing together, always laughing about the fact we couldn't remember the words, and wondering who the 'King' was.
- ♦ The memory and appreciation of music is virtually the last thing to go when someone has dementia. I would often find that music brought tears to the residents' eyes, but when asked if they were all right, they would reply that they were 'happy tears'.

Notes from Pam:

- ♦ Maggie is my daughter-in-law. She trained in social work, has worked as a carer, and loves folk music.
- ♦ In case you don't know, a 'goonie' is a nightgown!

Speed, Bonnie Boat by Maggie Butler

"Leave me alone," she screeched,
Pushing us away with her bony, aged hands.

"What is wrong with you?" she shouted, raging,
While we laboured on,
in our hot, stifling polyester uniforms,
beads of sweat forming on our foreheads and noses,
armpits already damp.

Tensions rising in the small bathroom-
getting further behind schedule.
Our backs and feet sore,
wishing our shift was over, nervously glancing at
each other,
my colleague and I.

"Speed, bonnie boat, like a bird on the wing,
over the sea to Skye," I began, softly.
She turned towards me, smiling-
a beatific glow illuminating her face.

"Carry the lad, that's born to be King, over the sea
to Skye," she sang tunefully in response, agitation
evaporated - music, the opiate.

Traditionally the elders of society were the holders of the culture for the next generations. Older people told stories that imparted their precious traditions and beliefs to later generations. They also passed on information and life skills.

In many Western societies it is now less common for extended families to live together and older people are often a long way away or in a care home. Our own children grew up hundreds of miles from grandparents, and without social media. Perhaps this is why our son appreciates the fact that Sofia has lots of quality time with all her grandparents.

With households separated for now because of Covid-19, inter-generational exchange has stopped for many of us, but perhaps a lot of grandparents have learned new technology skills in order to keep in touch, whilst younger people are doing more cooking and learning some survival skills.

Questions / Suggestions

What would you like to pass on to a younger person? Can you think of a way of doing so—tell a story, write a poem, describe a skill.

Is there any way your older friendship group could offer its accumulated knowledge and wisdom in the local community?

"For there is assuredly nothing dearer to a man than wisdom, and though age takes away all else, it undoubtedly brings us that."

The Roman philosopher, Cicero

Shaky Bookcase!

The experience of dementia is often described using the analogy of a tall bookcase. At the bottom are your oldest memories and at the top the most recent ones. The illness causes the bookcase to shake and so those most recent 'books' at the top fall off.

As the disease progresses there's more shaking and some of those in the middle tumble off, and so on further and further down.

Relating to someone with dementia means entering their reality, rather than contradicting it, as this can cause distress.

* * * * *

63% of grandparents with grandchildren aged under 16 now provide regular childcare. Those who look after their grandchildren for up to 15 hours a week are often fitter and healthier than their peers, and have a reduced risk of developing illnesses such as Alzheimer's.

'I've lost 5 minutes'

On the course on Ministry with Older People we were given the example of a lady in a care home who was distressed and kept saying she had lost 5 minutes. A chaplain explored with her what that statement symbolised for her. It was rooted in the fact that she actually no longer had a sense of time. Finding ways to manage that underlying issue diminished her distress.

Some facts from Age UK— Later Life in the United Kingdom 2018

850,000 people in the UK are estimated to be living with dementia. That number is expected to increase to 2 million in 30 years time.

While only 1 in 14 overall in the 65 + age group have dementia, the chances increase significantly with age, affecting 1 in 6 of over 80's and 1 in 3 of over 95's.

Loneliness is a significant factor in the development of Alzheimer's, the most common form of dementia.

Loneliness also increases the chance of premature death by a quarter, and is as bad for health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Only about 15% of over 85's live in care homes, but increasing numbers live in retirement complexes and villages, housing about 5% of older people.

Let us call them **Global Elders**, not because of their age, but because of their individual and collective wisdom.

This group derives its strength not from political, economic or military power, but from the independence and integrity of those who are here.

They do not have careers to build, elections to win, constituencies to please. They can talk to anyone they please, and are free to follow paths they deem right, even if hugely unpopular.

Nelson Mandela in his vision statement to The Elders, a group of elder statesmen who work for peace and justice.

Learn with Grandma was started by Valerie Wood-Gaiger a 76 year old living in the Welsh hills. She started putting on Facebook ideas and skills she'd like to pass on, in a quest to 'close the (digital) age gap'. This has inspired many projects where there is sharing across the generations.

My Dear New Friend



Before Covid lockdown the community project we help run, Ty Croeso, organised Tea and Hymns sessions for residents of local care homes and other older residents of the community. As it was one of our child-minding days, on the occasion shown in this photo Sofia came along too and really hit it off with this lady. School choirs and soloists also came to entertain.

Isolation is an issue that has been under the spotlight in recent years, thinking primarily of individuals in their own homes. During the Covid crisis there's been a lot of volunteer activity meeting the needs of those who were 'shielding' or 'self-isolating' in their homes, connecting with them by phone and collecting essentials for them. On the other hand, preventing family from visiting in care homes brought in a different kind of isolation, especially distressing for those with dementia.

- It reminds me of my Dad and his various relatively fancy cameras

- It shows my very blond hair at that age, and in the box alongside the photo will be a lock of my golden blond hair that we also found in Mum's house. My hair went mousy within a year or two and started to go grey when I was 18!

- The frame from which my washing line hangs is our swing, on which I spent many happy hours!

- The stool I'm standing on was made by my grandpa (Mum's father), who I don't remember, but I know he was very good at woodwork and gardening. I still have that stool but wonder if it's a bit big for the memory box!

I'm still looking around for other things to go in my box, and hoping to discover some other things that have several aspects to trigger memories, as this photo did.

Questions / Suggestions

What might be in your memory box?

Perhaps this could be a conversation idea for a fellowship or sharing group in the post Covid world.

Down Memory Lane

When we were clearing my mother's house a few years ago, my sister and I came across lots of boxes of photographic slides (remember those!). Our Dad was something of an amateur photographer. He developed his own photos in our attic and was nearly always behind the camera rather than in the picture!

It was no surprise to find piles of boxes of slides, but we were surprised to find some going back to 1956.

Here's one of me, aged 3, hanging out the washing! (With a simple bit of mental arithmetic you now know my age!)

One of the suggestions presented on the course I attended was to start to think now what we might put in a 'memory box' - that small collection of significant items that can be helpful should the memory start to fail. This photo is so far one of very few items in my proposed memory box! It has a number of connections for me:



Over the past few years we've seen TV programmes about schemes where very young children were taken into care homes to interact with older people. These experiments revealed how enlivening it could be for the older people to have the children around. Aches and pains became less limiting, and even the less sociable were gradually drawn into the action!

During lockdown one family decided to see what would happen if their children wrote letters to residents in the local care home, addressing the letters to 'My Dear New Friend'. The residents who received the letters decided they wanted to write back, and new friendships developed, albeit at a distance. Each generation enjoyed the exchange of news and stories. The scheme was then taken on widely as part of the Literacy Trust, as it encourages the old 'art' of letter-writing.

We look forward to re-starting our monthly Tea and Hymns, though it may be a long time before that's possible. Perhaps we can make 'Dear New Friends' in other ways.

Questions / Suggestions

When did you last write a letter? Could you drop someone a line who might otherwise be isolated, or connect with someone of another generation?

Where is your nearest care home and what might be the needs and possibilities there?

The ageing process has you firmly in its grasp if you never get the urge to throw snowballs'

Doug Larson

Age is meant for the revival of the spirit. Age is meant to allow us to play -with ideas, with projects, with friends, with life.

Joan Chittister, in 'The Gift of Years'

Calon Lan

At our Tea and Hymns session we always end with a verse of the popular Welsh hymn, 'Calon Lân'. It expresses something that has become even more poignant now, as we have examined our priorities during lock-down, and recognised the value in simple things.

Nid wy'n gofyn bywyd moethus,
Aur y byd na'i berlau mân:
Gofyn wyf am galon hapus,
Calon onest, calon lân.

*Calon lân yn llawn daioni
Tecach yw na'r lili dlos:
Dim ond calon lân all ganu
Canu'r dydd a chanu'r nos.*

I seek not life's ease and pleasures,
Earthly riches, pearls nor gold;
Give to me a heart made happy,
Clean and honest to unfold.

*A clean heart o'erflow'd with goodness,
Fairer than the lily white:
A clean heart forever singing,
Singing through the day and night.*