

SUCCESSFUL AGEING?³⁸

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‘There is a difference between living and being alive.’

‘Growing older is about adding life to years rather than just adding years to our lives’.

Do you ever wonder what shape old age might take for you? How would you define successful ageing? What steps might you like to take in order to enable age and the ageing process to be as fruitful and creative as is possible or desirable?

We live in a postmodern world. Any engagement with ageing and the ageing process have been transformed as a consequence of this increasing acceptance of a life and a world which is both complex and diverse. There is a great deal more fluidity in the life course, and much less predictability about the fixed life stages outlined by many theorists.³⁹

It becomes, therefore, more difficult to get a wider perspective – as true and adequate a picture of reality as we possibly can. Heterogeneity rather than homogeneity is perhaps the new reality: our views of the person and the possibility of ageing are surrounded by an awareness of a great plasticity in our understanding of the person and of our behaviour. Postmodern lifestyles, for young and old alike, involve a dynamic mix of uncertainty, ambiguity and diversity. The pastoral care of any individual, but especially those individuals who are growing older needs to consider the necessity for us all to be flexibly adapting to a constantly changing world. This has led some theorists to argue that any serious commentary on ‘successful ageing’ must address the plasticity and adaptability of human nature which includes the ability to adapt positively even under the most adverse of life’s conditions and circumstances.

Over the past ten years my pastoral work with older people has revealed that later life stages are testing for most older people. Part of the privilege of pastoral care is to see the amazing untapped resilience and reserves that people have for coping with altered life circumstances. Very often, older people demonstrate the most inspiring of spirits in the way in which they continue to recognise and adapt to life in a climate of constant movement and loss. The secret of ‘successful ageing’ may be in part the result of our ability to draw upon those strengths and attitudes that will allow us to stay connected with life. Religion and spirituality often play an important part in the nurturing of inner resources which enable

³⁸These themes are discussed at greater length in the forthcoming book, Woodward, J., *Valuing Age*, SPCK, 2008.

³⁹Gingold, R., *Successful Aging*, OUP, 1992.

an individual to adapt, connect and recreate the shape of their inner lives.

Defining successful ageing

The concept of 'successful ageing' is a rich one, and its initial entry into the field of social gerontology can be found in gerontological literature over thirty years ago.⁴⁰

The term is appealing because it implies that ageing can, for the most part, be a positive and rewarding experience. There is, inevitably, a range of perspectives identified with the concept. It is worth noting that the concept of 'successful ageing' is often related to the concept of middle age or the 'mid-course' of life, in that 'successful ageing' is identified as, in effect, the continuation of the activities, interests and involvements that have been developed in that phase of a person's life. Some gerontologists have offered an opposite view, seeing older people as progressively disengaging from life this being an important part of normal 'ageing'.⁴¹

'Successful ageing' has often been defined in the following way:

The absence of disease and disability.

The maintenance of intellectual and physical functions.

Engagement in meaningful activities.⁴²

Such a viewpoint is consistent with the World Health Organisation's definition of health as a state of wellbeing rather than merely the absence of disease.⁴³ This concept should certainly embrace a wider social perspective. Studies of ageing tell us that good health, healthy inter-personal relationships and personality characteristics such as self-efficacy are significant predictors of continuing functional independence and indicators of 'successful ageing'. A person's ability to shape the quality of life is a significant dimension to 'successful ageing' and has an inevitable materialistic, financial and class base.

One of the weaknesses of much of the gerontological research in this area lies in the absence of input from older people. It is becoming increasingly important that research should be based in the diverse experiences and perspectives of older people, so that harmful or false stereotypes can be avoided.

Success and your journey?

When considering what valuing age might look like for us, one of the questions that all individuals ask at some time is – what will the future bring? This is a

⁴⁰Heath, H., and Schofield, I., (Editors), *Healthy Ageing*, Mosby, 1999.

⁴¹Cumming, E., and Henry, W., *The Process of Disengagement*, Basic Books, 1961.

⁴²Hockey, J., and James A., *Growing and growing Old*, Sage, 1993.

⁴³See the WHO web page at www.who.int.

question which occupies individuals who approach the stage of life known as old age. Sometimes this stage can be precipitated on an individual basis by a major life crisis and one's philosophy of life might be in need of examination in the light of the circumstances. We should remember that over the life-course, all human beings change in the definition of themselves and the world, their modes of response and adaptation, and in their basic orientation and value judgements. Religion and its importance for an individual can change and be shaped by a number of external and internal factors.

So older age, if nothing else, will provide an opportune time to explore the undiscovered self. This might be problematic or traumatic work, as some of the cherished hopes and aspirations have to be reformed in the light of experience. It is also a time when individuals may need someone to accompany them on this pastoral journey. There is some negotiation to take place with self and others on the ageing pilgrimage. In other words, some of the geography of old age might be anticipated through the processes of planning and a balanced level of reflection. Fears and anxieties need to be faced and choices to be made about what the direction of the journey might look like. Emergent trends in Western societies show that for increasing numbers of older people there is plenty of opportunity for personal growth and development.

People are complex, adaptive organisms and there is no reason to think that they can be easily explained. Part of this social call to 'successful ageing' is to engage in more explicit conversation and debate about the meanings that older peoples attach to their lived experiences, including notions about ageing well and 'successful ageing'. Why let ageing happen to us? Is there a possibility of empowered reshaping of what this pilgrimage might look like?

Antonovsky indicates that well-being is not an outcome as much as a dynamic predicator of an individual's ability to cope and adapt to the changes and assaults of life. All of us should be more interested in health and wellbeing but the key variable to be understood is the sense of coherence, whose three major components - comprehensibility, meaning and manageability - are dynamically interrelated as people deal with the inevitable challenges of existence. From this perspective Antonovsky sees health as a personal resource to be used against those forces that constantly affect our personal existence.⁴⁴ One might conclude that consumerism, individualism and materialism are significant forces in postmodernity that do not enable an individual to have the space and spiritual depth which enable them to make life worth living. Many people experience superficial completeness or wellbeing but have a deep and prevailing sense that life is not worth living. Success and material wealth can also bring gloom and emptiness. From a Christian perspective, we might affirm the power of the human spirit, created and nurtured by God, which can propel the individual

⁴⁴Antonovsky, A., *Health, stress and coping*, Jossey-Bass, 1979.

forward in full recognition that the ultimate task is to positively affirm one's position in relation to life and the world. This sense of perspective can bring depth and nurture, hope and meaning.

Social planners would be well advised to understand that the aged of tomorrow will make very different lifestyle choices compared with the aged of today. Looking across the generations it seems unlikely that my generation will tolerate some of the choices presently provided for the older generation. People reaching middle age and beyond are now beginning to understand and appreciate the potential contribution of the lifestyle factor to personal health and wellbeing. In essence, lifestyle is a descriptive term for the unique pattern of living adopted by an individual in terms of his or her interaction with the self and the social world, with implications for a dynamic relationship between personal values, beliefs and strategies for coping with life and change. The spiritual task here is to ask 'how might we live more meaningful lives?' Many older people are experiencing an awakened life - an understanding that freedom is the absence of unnecessary restrictions on how life should be lived. The third age will increasingly be seen as a stage for adding new dimensions to the lived experience - the seeking of enhanced flexibilities in life-style choices.

The process by which an individual connects with and the nature of meaning is a complex one influenced by a person's previous history and involving culture, language and lived experiences. It is well to remember that the life journey involves the self-interpreting person in a series of real-world context changes, formed by such matters as education, marriage, divorce, relationships, work, unemployment, retirement and illness. Indeed, as people age they are progressively involved in a matrix of constant change and loss. The quest for personal wellbeing during old age is virtually impossible if one's life is contaminated by a continuing sense of apathy, inertia and meaninglessness. Any reference to wellbeing and old age must also be cognisant of the view that loneliness is an important consideration in old age that needs further examination if we are to understand the subtleties of why it occurs and how it can be ameliorated.

Some writers advocate that wellbeing is reflected in part by those individuals who are willing to be open to new ideas, risks and opportunities. This perspective is extended by introducing the concept of the individual who might embrace continual renewal and growth by seeking new adventures, meanings and motivations. Equally important is the need to understand that the person's experience of ageing takes place in a social context, thereby exposing the individual to a dynamic range of interacting social forces. A single older person may experience age in a

very different way from a married older person given the importance, for good or ill, of the network of the immediate and extended family.⁴⁵

We should draw attention to the fact that many of our thoughts and feelings about age are socially constructed and result in a range of stereotypes about what it means to be old. There can often be a tension between how we ourselves feel and how society sees us.

We should not underestimate the spiritual and existential search for meaning that age can bring. The following questions are very significant: Who have I been? Who am I now? Who will I be? What will become of me? These questions will no doubt generate a range of reflections resulting in meanings and interpretations that have a significant influence on the health and wellbeing of the older person. Life-review, story-telling and story-sharing can offer a real potential for facilitating a definition of the self and exploring this in a light of the concept of 'successful ageing'. Existential dilemmas that come to mind in this conversation concern death, freedom, hopelessness, meaninglessness, responsibility, discipline, despair, obsolescence, and loneliness.

In all of this reflection, all of the pastoral accompanying, mistakes will be made, of both omission and commission, and undoubtedly they will continue to occur. Life, however, must and will go on – we have to decide how much energy we wish to apply to the pilgrimage or excursion. Of course, some people waste much of their time on regret, guilt, and ruminations of the worst kind. Some people talk of killing time, when they fail to see that time, in the end, quietly kills us all.

The pursuit of 'successful ageing' must always be seen as work in progress. There are many pathways to its achievement. With this thought in mind I want to offer some thoughts about what makes for 'successful ageing'.

Be flexible. As we have discussed above, the modern world is an amazing mix of uncertainty and ambiguity – and flexibility helps us to adapt to the changes in the world around us and the changes within us. This flexibility or adaptability can help us to respond positively even in the most adverse of conditions and circumstances. We might be surprised what inner resources are there waiting to be used when the time comes.

Be ready to define yourself beyond work or the work role. Too much of our identity is imprisoned in the status or importance or control that our work and our work-role bring. If we invest too much in work, it can reveal all the cracks and problems that we hide away from once it is removed.

Discover your inner self. Older age, if nothing else, will provide a time to

⁴⁵Simmons, H., and MacBean, C., *Thriving after 55* See Woodward, J.,

explore our undiscovered self. This might constitute a challenge, but ageing can be a pilgrimage and an opportunity to look inside at what we really believe to be true, what bothers us, and how we might make a difference in this particular stage of our lives.

Learn something new. Learning new tricks keeps us alive – it broadens our sense of comprehensibility and meaning. So let's go on a Spanish course, learn about the classification of trees, or revisit those endless rows of books on our shelves which are waiting to be digested. There are also new people to be interested in whose lives can change ours and who may be changed by knowing us.

The opportunity to be someone different. Gerontologists reflect on the stages of the lifecycle. Some refer to the first stage as the stage of formation, which is the time to grow an identity before we are consumed by busyness. Properly balanced, the second stage is the time of one's major contribution to work or home or community. This consuming busyness, which demands so much of us and is so overarching, is, however, only one stage of our journey. A third age is the opportunity to be someone different. If there are things about our lives that we want to change, then we should stop complaining and get on and change them. There are no restrictions on how life should be lived. If we have spent the first part of our life living in other people's ways, we should seek to live in our own way – or, in the words of the professionals, seek the enhanced flexibilities in lifestyle choices.

Get philosophical. In a materialistic world we live too often on the surface. Successfully ageing is about thinking through what you believe. Who have I been? Who am I now? What bits of the past do I need to leave behind as properly dead and gone, and how might I shape the future – by doing philosophy? Are you free? Are you hopeless? Who makes this journey with you?

Prepare for death. You can't put it off – and don't leave it to chance. Think about how you want your life celebrated. Thinking about change, loss, diminishment and, ultimately, death will help you face these changes and difficulties as they emerge through the course of ageing.⁴⁶

These initial thoughts about 'successful ageing' give us an opportunity to reflect on its shape for us and the opportunity that we have to influence the direction of our pilgrimage into age.

⁴⁶See Woodward, J., *Befriending Death*, SPCK, 2005.