

THE THING ABOUT OLD AGE

One of the saddest things is to see the once beautiful once young going all lumpy and unattractive. One of the problems is that the young don't much like to watch it either.

The End of Youthfulness

When you compare the decade from ten to twenty years of age with the thirty years from twenty to fifty, it rapidly becomes clear that, however quietly you are allowed to take it, the teenage years cover some of the fastest and most radical changes you will ever see in your life. By comparison, however rough your ride, little happens to you between 20 and 50 that is really worthy of the name of change. The person who looks out of a grey and corduroy countenance after half a century is basically the same person that looked out of a fresh face at 20.

Old age brings with it some pretty awful pieces of news. They say your brain cells cease to replace themselves at about 18, so there is not the slightest doubt that mental processes are impaired. Memory can play tricks, taste buds become blunted, the spectacles get thicker, the ear is not so sharp. The loud paunch and the onset of hair in the wrong places and the sudden arrival of rheumatic pain can so often accompany our first real brush with serious illness.

"I used always to long to be sixty," a simple old lady once told me, "because when I was a little girl in school a lady came in a beautiful blue suit, and they told me she was sixty. So I said, When I'm sixty I'll have a beautiful suit like that." A child's fantasy about age - but she assured me it had worked for her. She had an image of "sixty" that meant dignity and freedom and a sort of style. I remember her with affection, and not a little envy!

The End of Responsibilities

The laying-down of work responsibilities can be gratefully received or dreaded and vigorously resisted. For so long we've been identified with our jobs; now we are relieved - or robbed - of the sense of identity they bestowed. Many - especially men - feel disinherited; they can die of the shock. If the work has been really absorbing, there may have been little in the way of hobbies or enthusiasms to cushion the impact of retirement: one of the horrors of the world of work is the way it robs you of interests by simply absorbing your time. The positive value - freedom from work - therefore assumes a threatening character. It becomes a deprivation.

The Distancing of Death

If one examines those societies which still treat the old with honour, one finds that this is not proportioned by any quantifiable link with the usefulness, or the wealth, or the functioning of the aged, but by a much more mysterious obedience to human realities. The previous generation deserves respect and care because we belong to them, because of their community with us, which is based on their parenthood of us. You will probably discover an organically-linked sensitivity and culture about the mystery of death. In Great Britain we have lost our faith, and this shows in our loss of understanding about death. Feeling completely helpless in the face of death, the average adult acts swiftly to protect the young from contact with the sick or the dying. Most people have never seen a dead body, or at least not until they are themselves well on in years. Many children have never been to a funeral, because it is regarded as a reality too stark for a child's mind to bear (speaking as a regular server at funerals from the age of seven, I must confute such talk: we were fascinated). The regular occurrence of vandalism in cemeteries, the obsessive interest in fantasy-horror and ersatz supernatural cult fiction is symptomatic of the emptiness of the space where religious feeling and meaning ought to live. The denial of death robs human life of a basic seriousness and justice, and I would submit that the marginalization of the aged is partly a function of the same denial.

The Cultivation of Youth

The obsession with appearing to be younger than one is, is certainly driven by the same engine. The exalted mendacity of material advertising cosmetics ("...removes wrinkles...prevents ageing...restores luminosity and bloom to the cheeks" &c), is widely acknowledged to be a pack of lies, but the expenditure of big potatoes on such products seems to be well-assured for the foreseeable future. The use of cosmetic surgery is equally popular, and the fashion industry keeps the army of recycled teenagers in the uniform they seem to need. Men as well as women join in the campaign to offset the ravages of time.

The Gifts Reserved For Age

Are there things which belong to the old, which can help to give value to this unnerving time? The supposition of qualities like "wisdom", "experience", and "maturity" might or might not apply. Some old people are exceedingly immature, inexperienced, or unwise; it would not do to set up a shopping-list of *desiderata* which might be quite absent in a real old person. We should look for deeper things than these. For instance, the aged know, as a matter of fact, more about weakness, infirmity, and the shortness of life than a young person ever can. For a young person, an aged person can modify and qualify the important areas of hope and vision with a genuine realism and balance drawn from truths few young people could be expected to appreciate. The moderation of youthful outlook takes place, not in an arranged discussion or counselling-session, but by virtue of the continual presence of the old in the life of the young. A family home that does not enjoy the presence of the old members of the family is made immeasurably poor. As so often, it is in receiving that people give of themselves; there is nothing so beautiful as the relationship between a little child and an old grandparent, in which the old person asks for so little, and the young person offers a very pure kind of love.

The parental rôle of the aged is thus deeper than conscious concepts. In them the young can be open to vital vicarious understandings about human life and its needs and limitations. It is of course likely that there will be many other gifts - of experience and humour, of alternative understandings and responses, of affection, and so on. But these are all subordinate to the simple personal fact of the presence of the old in the human family.

Breaking Down Barriers

Marginalisation is a disastrous impoverishment, not only of the marginalised, but of the community. The attempt to sustain human life in a community that has been edited of its old, its disabled, its impaired members is a doomed one. It has been said that the health of a society can be accurately measured by the number of its members who find themselves rejected, unwanted, or imprisoned. The modern "old people's home" is usually a social disaster in which self-respect and joy in being alive are systematically eroded. We are badly failing the aged in our families (too busy, too exhausted) and in the wider society. In a world where those acknowledged as aged will shortly be in the majority, this is storing up trouble for the future. If there is anything we can do to prevent the isolation and banishment of the aged, we should most certainly do it. After all, the prime of life is quite short, and ageing is already happening to all of us. The Thing this week will endeavour to examine the barriers which are there, and try to plot their downfall.

The Thing meets in Fr Philip's Office, Block "C" of Cherry Tree Buildings, at 1.15 on Wednesday.