



# ***“Called To Be Old”***

**A gathering to reflect on older people’s  
gifts to the Church and to society**

**Friday 16<sup>th</sup> October 2015**

# **Reflecting on older people's gifts to church and society**

**“Life views are shaped by a  
regnant gestalt of low-high-low  
proportions, an iconic illusion  
that presorts all perceptions of  
the life course into a tri-phasic  
sequence.”**

**Paul H. Pruyser**

# **WARNING DANGEROUS TIMES ...**

For those who are becoming old, or are already old previous assumptions about later life can no longer be taken-for-granted.

Now the 'third age' might easily last 30 years

The downward drag of negative attitudes to old age have an impact on our attitude to growing old - and the general attitude of others to older people.

Third-agers have to resist this habitual undervaluing, and to do so for the long-term – for three decades or even more.

# LOSSES ASSOCIATED WITH AGE

- Loss of dignity
- Loss of paid work
- Loss of relationship (*Loving and working are the twin pillars of mental health*)
- Loss of independence
- Loss of time (in the context of unstructured time)
- Loss of opportunities for 'reality testing'



# If you want to be cheerful ... go to church

Tom Whipple Science Editor

If you want to be happy in your fifties and later, go to church, but don't volunteer for charities and don't join any political parties.

A study of almost 10,000 people over the age of 50 has tried to discover the kind of social activities that made people less likely to be depressed.

Over four years, people across Europe were asked whether they engaged in voluntary work, education, sports and social clubs and political or religious organisations. At the same

time, they measured depressive symptoms — whether people were sleeping, had lost their appetite or had suicidal thoughts.

Past research has shown a link between religious observance and feeling happier, but researchers have not been able to establish the cause. Could it be, for instance, that a tendency to believe in God comes in the sort of people who do not get depressed anyway?

The study, by scientists from the London School of Economics and published in the *American Journal of Epidemiology*, tried to eliminate such

explanations by looking at the same people over time, and seeing whether changes in their life at one point led to a shift in how many depressive symptoms they had. They found that few things changed mental health in the long term.

Volunteering and sports appeared to make no difference four years later. "One of the most puzzling findings is that although healthier people are more likely to volunteer, we found no evidence that volunteering actually leads to better mental health," Mauricio Avendano, who was involved in the

study, said. "It may be that any benefits are outweighed by other negative impacts of volunteering, such as stress."

Participation in political organisations definitely made people's lives more unhappy. Dr Avendano suggested that trade-offs could be involved in certain social interactions. "Participants receive a higher sense of reward when they first join an organisation but if it involves a lot of effort and they don't get much in return, the benefits may wear off after some time," he said.

Religious activity seemed to be the only intervention to make a positive

difference to a person's mental well-being over time.

Dr Avendano said that the power of religion could be less because of its spiritual effects than the structure, support and sense of community that it provided. "The church appears to play a very important social role in keeping depression at bay and also as a coping mechanism during periods of illness in later life," he said.

"It is not clear to us how much this is about religion per se, or whether it may be about the sense of belonging and not being socially isolated."



Head of a Young Girl was on board the Adix, far left, which was named after the second wife of Jaime Botin, below

work. He said that there was a reason not to

## **SOME OF THE GAINS WITH AGE**

- **Secure in one's own status i.e. less afraid of the slurs of eccentricity**
- **Relaxing of defences (brings stamina)**
- **Ability to share personal credos – related to the freedom of revealing one's innermost thoughts because of less fear of mockery**
- **Greater ability to live in the present**
- **Competence + availability (?)**

# 'DIALECTICAL LOGIC'

- Society values 'formal logic' - analysing a range of factors to arrive at the right answer
- Klaus Riegel suggests that adults have the potential for 'dialectical logic'
- Dialectical logic ends up with a question rather than an answer.

*The ability to tolerate contradictions and ponder contradictions to discover more profound questions acknowledging that life is too complicated and rich to be held within our thinking, and this energises the thinking process.*

Formal logic aims at the elimination contradictions i.e. expects a right answer



# COGNITIVE ABILITY AND AGEING

Usually assumed that as we age there is a decline in our cognitive and intellectual ability

However, research suggests decline is not inevitable and if decline occurs it can often be reversed

Researchers propose a PLASTICITY MODEL – should an individual's cognitive performance begin to decline with appropriate intervention the decline can be reversed

*This 'plasticity model' emphasises the importance of a stimulating environment for older people*

**A virtuous process...**

**2/3rds of 67 elderly people in a nursing home needed 'heavy care' ... but as a result of restorative activity, a year later the number had fallen to only 9 needing 'heavy care'.**

**The restorative activity: A weekly poetry / arts class**

**Led to:           Improvements in memory recall  
                      Improvement in concentration / control**

**Better mobility**

**Reduction in incontinence**

**Reduced confusion because of better  
attention to the world**

**Because... of having someone whom you want to please...**

From F E Moss and V J Halamandaris (1977) "Too Old, Too Sick, Too Bad - Nursing Homes in America" Maryland: Aspen Systems Corporation

## **FOR EXAMPLE:**

**2/3rds of 67 elderly people in a nursing home needed 'heavy care' ... but as a result of restorative activity a year later the number had fallen to only 9 categorised as 'heavy care'**

**The restorative activity: A weekly poetry or arts class... leading to:**

- **Improvements in memory recall**
- **Concentration and control are promoted**
- **Reduced confusion because of better attention to the world**
  - **Better mobility**
  - **Reduction in incontinence**



# **LONGEVITY HAD / HAS A PURPOSE?**

- ✘ **Availability of the unencumbered older female. The deliberate enlistment of grandparents into the work of rearing the young stands out as a defining characteristic of Homo sapiens.**
- ✘ **The social environment the young offspring has to negotiate is too complex to be mediated by the parenting generation alone and needs to be nuanced by the older generation.**
- ✘ **The basic equation for ‘hunter gatherers’:  
youngsters ate more than they could contribute, adults probably ate as much as they hunted and gathered, older women ate less than they could gather, thus compensating for what would otherwise be a recurring shortfall.**



# **GRANDPARENTS: BIOLOGICAL VALUE**

**Bob Martin: Only 2 species live beyond menopause - Homo Sapiens and the large sea mammals. Why should these species invest in the longevity of barren females?**

**Martin speculates that older, barren females aid the nurture of the next but one generation because of the complex social environment into which the youngster has to be socialised.**

**Studies of the children of the crack-cocaine epidemic in Harlem in New York show that those youngsters with a grandmother closely involved in their lives were the most likely to free themselves from the chaos of addiction**

(Children of the Crack Cocaine Epidemic - Minkler M. and Roe K. M. (1983) "Grandmothers As Care Givers" Sage, New York)



Blessed are the peacemakers,  
For they have freed themselves from sinful  
wrath.

(Dante Alighieri)

# **The work of Dan Blazer and Erdman Palmore**

"Religion and Aging in a Longitudinal Panel" The  
Gerontologist, Vol 16 (1) 1976

**This work has been regularly repeated by  
other researchers and on each occasion  
a positive experience of growing old is  
strongly linked with 'doing business with  
God'.**



# **THIS MIGHT BE DESCRIBED AS ELDERHOOD...**

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**Rather than assume the challenge as we grow older is to maintain a mid-life pattern of activity for as long as we can, there is scope for:**

- a redefinition of self and our relationship with others**
- greater capacity for engaging with existential questions to do with the purpose and meaning of life**

**‘The virtue we can develop in old age is wisdom, that detached concern with life itself in the face of death itself. It (wisdom) maintains and conveys the integrity of experience, in spite of the decline in bodily and mental functions. It responds to the need of the oncoming generation for an integrated heritage and yet remains aware of the relativity of all knowledge.’ Erik Erikson**

As we become old we gain the capacity for 'grand-generativity' i.e. *care of the present with concern for the future, especially for the future of younger generations and their futures, and for generations not yet born, and for the survival of the world as a whole.*

**A MUCH  
UNDERESTIMATED FORCE IN  
THE WORLD IS THE POWER  
OF A RADICALISED OLDER  
WOMAN!**

