

Synopsis of Unitarian address Feb 2010,

Ageing Gracefully/Disgracefully

I chose this topic for two reasons. Firstly for professional reasons, as for many years I've worked in the area of educational gerontology- older adult learning. This work expanded into a much wider interest in all things related to ageing and has given me a fascinating insight into the very many ways adults cope with growing old.

The second reason is much more personal because in July of this year, after almost 40 years of full time work I will be retiring. I will thus be faced with a number of lifestyle choices and options for how I wish to live this next stage of my life. There are many different approaches to growing old and in this address I'd like to explore some of them.

To begin, however, what do we mean by ageing? Well it is a normal, natural and unavoidable part of a human's life and is a multidimensional process of physical, psychological and social change. Some aspects of human lives can and do improve with age, others unfortunately can and do decline. Some people, like Jenny Joseph's character relish the thought of growing old. William Shakespeare's character in As You Like It can see nothing but doom and gloom. There are also different definitions of age -chronological, social and biological

Overall, however, ageing in terms of growing old does not get a good press. This has largely been due to the over emphasis on a traditional, outdated medical model equating ageing with automatic and irreversible mental and physical decline. It is only relatively recently partly as a result of a plethora of other academic disciplines becoming involved in ageing research- the psychologists, the biologists, the geneticists, the nutritionists, the physiologists etc- that views (including those of doctors) have broadened and decline is no longer seen as inevitable.

Currently research into ageing is big business and pharmaceutical companies see a huge market in drugs, medicines and treatments which can, mask, delay or stop the negative aspects of ageing. There are currently vast amounts of money being spent investigating a wide range of ageing theories but there is no single answer as to what causes human ageing.

Every so often a wonder drug is developed or a new treatment identified. One of the most recent discoveries is Resveratrol, a chemical found in red grapes which has been shown to significantly expand the lifespan of worms and flies. Hailed as a major breakthrough in ageing research, its relevance for human life extension is now being called into question. To what extent ageing is genetic in origin as opposed to environmental is a contentious issue in the world of ageing research but researchers do believe that further extension of the human lifespan is probable and will happen in the future.

But until such research is proven to be ethical, beneficial and safe, what can we do at present to ensure both quantity and quality of later life?

Current research regarding what constitutes 'physical' healthy ageing will point to the need for the following

- Some exercise
- Healthy weight
- Non smoking
- Limited alcohol intake

From a mental/ emotional health perspective research also highlights the importance of stable/supportive relationships and what are termed mature defences.

Mature defences can be described as the coping strategies that people use when faced with the changes and challenges that come with later life. Older people's coping strategies are many and varied. My experiences of working with older adults over the last twenty five years have led me to identify 4 broad coping categories. All have good and bad aspects to them:

1. The Denier

- a. The Masker who tries to hide all evidence of ageing e.g. colouring hair and
 - b. The Total denier who refuses to accept that he/she is ageing- it is everybody else
- The Deniers' good point is that age is never an inhibitor to life choices. Deniers often live very full lives. The flaw is that there is no plan B should anything serious go wrong and they find it very difficult to accept any age related problem

2. The Fatalist

Fatalists, on the other hand, find age related illness easier to cope with because they expect it-some even relish it. Age dominates their lives and often limits it. This may sound very negative but there is some evidence that negative thinking isn't always bad. Fatalists are never shocked when something goes wrong and often have comprehensive plans in place for anything that might happen to them.

3. The Enthusiast

Enthusiasts are much more positive in both in outlook and in action. They realise and accept that they are growing old and are determined to fill their later life with all sorts of new experiences. They're usually great fun to be with and often not bothered what other people think of them. Their downside is that they can be a rather self centred and hedonistic putting their own needs and interests ahead of friends and family.

4. The Realist

Realists at first glance appear to be the best adjusted to later life. They accept they are growing old, are willing to make appropriate changes. They read the up to date research about aging well and are influenced but not driven by it. Moderate realists will aim for healthy lifestyle but not at the expense of all personal pleasure. Realists can, however, flip into the 'boring' category with the more extreme becoming totally immersed in research, following one fad after another.

So do you recognise any of these types? Do you fall into any of these categories or perhaps you are a mixture of all four?

Lastly I want to look briefly at why I think Unitarians are well placed to cope with ageing. First of all we are used to there being no easy answers to complex issues. Unitarianism is a religion in which there are few (if any) absolute truths. Secondly we are willing to listen to many different views on topics and to synthesise information in a way which is of relevant and personal use. Thirdly we are used to questioning conventional thought and accepted wisdom.

As I said at the beginning of my address, ageing happens to all humans and in the latter part of life can throw up all sorts of problems and challenges. At the end of the day I believe that quality of life is more important than quantity of life and as I move into this next stage of life that my coping mechanisms will be adequate to allow it to be fulfilling and enjoyable. Life, from wherever it comes, and whatever stage you are at is a gift. Let's all appreciate it.