

CITYtheology

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WHAT'S THE AGEnda?

WHAT WILL HELP US
WITH THE WORK OF
GROWING OLDER?

TAKING THE LONG VIEW

EXPLORING THE
PURPOSE OF
OLDER AGE IN THE
CONTEXT OF THE
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OVER THE HILL AND EMBRACING THE VIEW

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WHAT'S THE AGENDA? WHAT WILL HELP US WITH THE WORK OF GROWING OLDER?

Revd Keith Albans explores how to make the best of the view at the 'top of the hill'.

Although the mountaineer and the downhill skier share a similar setting for their activities, as well as the common objective of reaching the bottom of the mountain safely and in one piece, the shape of their challenges is entirely different. Many seem to apply this as an analogy to life, seeing that we first live life as a mountaineer and as we age we become downhill skiers. This rests on the assumption that the first part of human life is concerned with gaining skills and being strong while the second part (literally 'over the hill') is about loss of strength and potential. Kenneth Howse expressed it like this, 'We think of human powers and capabilities as following a parabolic trajectory through the life course: eventually they stop climbing upwards and take a downward turn.' As Kenneth Howse continues, however, "If there is a dimension of life which stands apart from this pattern of change, it is the spiritual dimension".

For an elite athlete, the progression through their career is likely to have the shape of going uphill and then downhill, and for them retirement will be brought on by an inability to perform in the way they once did. Some choose to go out at the top, while others linger into the twilight.

I recall Steve Davis, the former snooker world champion, said he relished the challenge of pitting his skills and experience against the younger opponents making their way in the sport. He didn't expect always to win, or even to perform in the way he once had, but instead to discover a new sense of purpose and a new measure of performance.

Later life requires this kind of approach if it's not simply to be seen as a falling away from what once was.

In 1933, the psychiatrist Carl Jung wrote, "One cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning; for what was great in the morning will be of little importance in the evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie." More recently Marie de Hennezel put it like this, "We still have to construct a more positive image of this time of life, confront our fears in order to overcome them, and work out a real policy for preventing unhappy old age. Lastly, it is up to us to combat the denial of old age and death, by working at growing old."

So if we're to make the best of the view as we travel 'over the hill' what might we put on our spiritual AGEnda that will help us work at growing old?

AGENDA...

1. Openness – Combat the denial of old age and death.

Most advertising to elders majors on denial, aiming to cover up the effects of ageing or promote a sense of escapism. But to best enjoy the view, being real about the stage of life we are at seems fundamental. We have to recognise that some hopes can no longer be realised – I will never open the batting for England for example – but that does not mean new dreams cannot be envisaged, worked at and experienced. Part of this openness can be about having conversations with those who are accompanying us



on our later life journeys especially around end-of-life issues. It can be hard for family members to come on board with this but they can take their lead from us.

2. Unfinished Business - ‘Regrets, I had a few... but then again too few to mention’ – only you just did!

None of us are likely to have got to the period called ‘later life’ without having incurred hurts and sorrows or, equally, without having trodden on a few toes here and there. Of course, not everything can be ‘undone’, but some hurts can be healed and ‘before it’s too late’ is a helpful watchword.

Unfinished business also includes the things undone and the extension of new dreams and the task of making new memories.

The ‘over the hill’ journey is not just about remembering times past because the journey itself becomes the stuff of memories. For example, at a party for Charlotte’s 110th birthday, she commented that she had not had a passport until she was 100.

3. Encouraging Reflection & Depth - “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards” (Kierkegaard)

Richard Rohr wrote, “while the task of the first half of life is to create a proper container for one’s life, the task of the second half of life is to find the actual contents that this container was meant to hold and deliver.” Part of experiencing the ‘over the hill’ journey, if it is to be as full an experience as possible, has to include some reflection on what has gone before. This will arise from sorting our unfinished business (item 2 on the AGenda), but we also need to arrive at a sober understanding of what has been. As a Minister in the Methodist Church, I reflect on what it has been about and ask ‘Whither the Church? Whither the Kingdom?’ I am aware of the sense of



vulnerability associated with this, as the words of Erik Erikson put it, “We all dimly feel that our transient historical identity is the only chance in all eternity to be alive as a somebody in a here and a now. We, therefore, dread the possibility, of which we are most aware when deeply young or very old, that at the end we may find that we have lived the wrong life or not really lived at all.”

4. Landmarks – ‘Any excuse for a party!’

Marking transitions is important and so is noting the milestones, such as State Retirement age, having lived 24000 days (as I did a few months ago) or 3 billion seconds (my Mum has recently achieved this). The journey uphill is marked by staging camps and so too is the journey down again, so we should take the time to stop and look around.

5. Maintaining Connection – it isn’t ‘all about me’

I retired and moved house at the same time and was acutely aware of the connections that I cut as I did this. As a minister some of those were inevitable and right, and in the first few months there were many things which I rightly avoided as I tried to adjust to a new place and a new way of being me.

But maintaining connections in a changing world, a changing church, and a changed location are vital if only to ward off loneliness, bitterness and a “it wasn’t like this in my day” attitude.

In particular, it is crucial to be in touch with elders while you can as well as to be available to those below. Such intergenerational living is another part of making sense of the ‘over the hill’ journey. It makes the journey a community and a communal event that is shared rather than a self-centred experience.

That’s my AGenda for working at growing old, crafting what you can, repairing what you can, making sense of what you can. I believe that, “The only people who are old are those who think they have learnt all they need to know and have given up discovering. For the rest of us each day reminds us of our ignorance and needles us towards discovering more, about ourselves and about life and death.” So my AGenda is to keep being needled – and make the most of the journey!

Recommended reading

Richard Rohr (2011) *Falling upwards. A spirituality for the two halves of life* published by LLC

Marie de Hennezel (2008) *The warmth of your heart prevents your body from rusting* published by Pan Publishing

Kenneth Howse (1999) *Religion, Spirituality and Older People* published by the Centre for Policy on Ageing

Erik & Joan Erikson *The Life Cycle Completed* (extended edition 1997) published by W.W. Norton

Keith Albans and Malcolm Johnson (eds.) (2013) *God, Me and Being Very Old* published by SCM



OVER THE HILL AND EMBRACING THE VIEW

Pippa Bonner shares insights from her encounters as a Pastoral Care Worker with older people.

I am an older person (a younger older person, rather than an older older person), and a Catholic who retired a few years ago only to hear about a part time job in pastoral care. Now I work offering pastoral care to older women in a Nursing and Care Home. I am a widow with children and grandchildren. I come from a social work background. I have a Masters Degree in Theology.

There is nothing special in any of this because all older people gain experience in all sorts of ways, but I am 'embracing the view' of later life. However I have some hearing loss, cataracts and am being investigated for wobbly legs. All of these symptoms make me wonder, am I moving towards being over the hill?

Over the hill *and* embracing the view

I value the encounters I have had with older people which illustrate their faith, their wisdom, grace, courage and humour despite their losses, pain, vulnerability and, in some cases, dementia. I have encountered great models of ageing as people patiently adjust to a new pain or a decrease in mobility. However, next day they may feel frustrated or anxious.

Older peoples' situations can vary from day to day. Through working alongside them, I have learnt about encountering people in the moment and trying to respond in that moment.

In my parish community I am encouraged and comforted by some of the parishioners in their 90s who come to Mass and other events. Priests and people come and go but these three represent for me the faith, love, humour, highs and lows, and gritty persistence in the life of the Parish. I know they have bad days too, but they are an inspiration. We all know people like these: strong models of living life, however tough it is, who would be very embarrassed to be described like this!

We never know how life will turn out for us in our older, older age. How can we continue to find hope, faith and perseverance? How can we embrace the view? Those of us who are older may have less physical strength but have life experience to know when we are managing, when we need some support or where we can continue to support others around us. Ageing, whether as a younger older person or an older, older person, seems to mean adjusting to new ways of managing how we feel, how we cope and experience new hurdles and happy times, often all at once. We embrace the view with its beauty, light and its dark patches.



Living in the moment

Some people may be viewed by others as being over the hill. But are they? For example, one woman with dementia often has disturbing thoughts, some of which are delusional and paranoid. It is distressing for her and those around her. However, a while ago she said to me, in a clear moment, that when she gets wound up sometimes poetry helps her to unwind. So, I and others read poetry with her for short periods. Sometimes she reads familiar poetry she learned at school. She also started to fear going out. On a lovely sunny spring afternoon recently, I took her out in a wheelchair. She pointed out to me the bird song and we enjoyed the flowers. We sang songs. One of them was "Row, row, row your boat" and I realised that the walking stick she insisted on clutching in the wheelchair had become the oar of our boat as we travelled past daffodils and even a butterfly in the March sunshine. She soon went back to feeling distressed but she had

had some respite from her disturbing thoughts and we saw her transient enjoyment.

Similarly, another resident who had advanced dementia had been a very gifted teacher, writer and Spiritual Director. Part of my role in the Care Home is to facilitate a monthly Discussion Group. We were going to be discussing Pope Francis' document *Laudato Si* which is about the world and creation. I had gone with her around the garden. Suddenly she was praising the flowers and trees around her in a deep, reflective and beautiful way. As soon as our walk was over, I wrote down what she had said and added it to the handout we were using. She came to the discussion and saw the piece she had said in the garden. She joyfully read it aloud then and later in the session she read it again! Everyone was pleased to see a strong glimpse of the previous person they had known. Her joy and the pleasure of the other residents seeing her joy and a reminder of her work was a gift to all of us.

Living faithfully

The Mass is an important part of many Catholics' lives, particularly older Catholics. For many people with dementia, Mass remains important in some way. Often the words, rhythms, actions and hymns are recalled and people may join in for a time. One woman sometimes bursts into tears when the words of Jesus' death are mentioned, but she can also become loudly ecstatic at the consecration. These are unfiltered, undiluted responses which teach us all to value what is happening. We should be grief stricken or ecstatic at the same moments, but repetition and an adult sense of decorum can get in the way.

Growing Old Grace-fully became aware during the Covid lockdown how some older people came to prefer watching Mass or other church services online. People could choose a priest, church or time that suited them, and could participate from a comfortable, familiar



armchair rather than journey to church. Some found they could hear the homily better. Other viewers like a Mass where the camera does a close up of the consecration or there are a number of cameras to include different views, including stained glass windows or paintings to help keep concentration focused. Growing Old Grace-fully hope that some televised Masses will continue.

So, are we or others embracing the view or over the hill? I think we can only answer for ourselves.

I have often noticed that people who society might deem as being “over the hill” appear to me as having moments of great understanding, wisdom, joy and vision.

I finish with a poem from the late Fr Michael McCarthy a priest, poet and friend to many. *Taking Communion to Jennifer* is about an encounter that was restorative for him and two older people at the same time. It comes from his last book of poems *The Bright Room* completed just before he died in 2018.

**I find her in good form.
We chat awhile, then move on to pray.
As we make our way through the Our Father
I sense a presence in the space behind me.
Concentrating on the moment, I continue:
*Lord I am not worthy that you should enter
Under my roof...* As she receives the host
A warm breath caresses the back of my neck.
Turning, I see an elderly resident in slippers
Her face stricken. A single sob escapes from her.
Placing my hand on her forehead I say the blessing.
Her full-on smile radiate down the length of my arm
Something is unlocked in us.**





WHAT DOES THE VIEW LOOK LIKE FROM UP THERE?

Helen Reid, Director of Leeds Church Institute, explores the purpose of older age in the context of climate catastrophe.



Anna and Simeon are an example of people who experienced fulfilment in later life. They had lived lives of service but it was in their old age that they saw all that they hoped for come to pass. They had long had a vision for serving God and, moreover, this was a vision embracing the whole people of Israel.

If we are considering the question whether later life is about 'embracing the view' or 'being over the hill', Anna and Simeon were clearly embracing the view.

Which leads to a question: what does embracing the view look like in Leeds 2022?

Taking the long view, it is clear we face critical questions because we are living in ways that are unsustainable. We have had decades of growing consumption and the pursuit of personal fulfilment which place a strain on the environment and the individual. We have a pension system and social care system that rely on present contributions being made at ever higher levels which means that young and old alike are under pressure.

Clearly we can't keep up the pace of current consumption because future generations will pay for today's environmental damage and fiscal borrowing.

Borrowing from the Future is the title of a book by Ann Morisy that looks at these challenges and how her own generation, the so called Baby Boomers, can respond with faith and integrity.

Later Life

Against the background of this view, we can look honestly at the purpose of old age. In the natural world, no other species has females living for decades after they can no longer produce the next generation. The principle of evolution suggests that humans have evolved to live as long as we have for a reason. A practical reason for long life is the contribution that the older generation make to raising the younger generation as they grow and emotionally supporting the middle generation as they work, create and build. Many older people in Leeds are actively involved in this practical aspect of life.

There is a 'non-practical' element worth exploring too. The psychologist Piaget identified stages of development from childhood to adulthood as we grow in conscious thought, become able to plan for the future, working out how to approach tasks and achieve objectives. But there is a further stage of development when we can live with contradiction and nuance.

So perhaps an important purpose of older age is to live with the things that don't immediately make sense or are contradictory; and help the younger generations with this.

This suggests that instead of attempting to extend the middle stage of 'adulthood' for as long as possible, for example, declaring that '60 is the new 40', in later life people might embrace the age and stage of wisdom without too much regret at leaving behind the generative stage of adulthood.

The needs of society and the environment requires those with the wisdom of later life to face the truth that ever increasing consumption in the West is no good for the planet even though we all want to enjoy a better life.

And also to face the truth that aspiring always to do better and have more is not good for our mental health. The challenge is how to call time on this and move into sustainable ways of living.

This will require the bringing of compassionate wisdom to our current cultural climate. People in later life are often less inhibited by what people think than those who are younger and also have a greater ability to 'live in the moment'. While older people do admittedly talk a lot about the past, that has to be

compared to the 'future focus' which younger people find so absorbing. The later life approach is hugely beneficial to addressing issues around sustainable living for the planet and the individual.

Older age is a time when people are well placed to actively seek to foster both an interest in higher things and concern for others. This is sometimes called Spiritual Capital and is much needed in our society facing economic and ecological challenges.

Second Chance Theology

Faith has a role to play in developing and sustaining compassionate wisdom and action in older age. Faith communities have a long tradition of helping people to live with an awareness of others even when this requires self sacrifice. However, promoting these values has at times alienated many people and among the older generation there are those who felt the high standards expected were demanded in a way they experienced as emotionally abusive. Among the Baby Boomer generation, there are people that lost faith with the Church.

So Ann Morisy calls for Second Chance Theology that asks older people to give the Church another chance. To enable this, the Church needs to witness to its greater humility and its greater recognition of personal fulfilment as part of God's plan for people. It is helpful when the Church talks more about struggle than sin. This is not to deny what Jesus achieved on the cross for our salvation but emphasises that Jesus was showing us a way to live.

This means that the Church needs to be invigorated in its mission among older people. It is common to talk about youth work as for the church of the future but this is also true of mission among older people. When people grow old today, most then grow older, and older still.

Older people are also the church of the future. Through faith and in later life, people have the spiritual capital to live and act with compassionate intention, being dissenters in the progress of ever greater consumption.

This is the view that we are embracing: not a pretty view from the top of a hill but rather an honest view of the challenges of our society. Later life doesn't bring an easy calling but it is an essential one. The challenge is whether in our own times, we can join Anna and Simeon in embracing the view in later life.

TAKING THE LONG VIEW?

Rev'd Gaynor Hammond offers a reflection on the experience of ministry in later life.



When I think about old age, it is still ‘somewhere over there’.

Till I get my aches and pains, or I hit a brick wall and occasionally the realisation hits that I have probably reached it!

But it can be so hard to accept.

My mind often goes back to the point in my life when I retired from my posts as Regional Tutor for Northern Baptist College and Associate Minister of a large church in Leeds. I was 67 years old.

I decided to join a church near home where I felt I could belong.

I approached the minister to talk about becoming a member.

The minister was really pleased and said that he knew which House Group would be just right for me. It was in the afternoon because it was for the ‘older ladies’. It was run by a man we shall call Fred and the group was called ‘Fred’s Lovely Ladies’. I was assured that they loved it and I would too. I thought to myself, *“Does he know who I am? Well he didn’t know me very well because he would have known I am not a ‘lovely lady’!”*

But is that how he now saw me, as an old lady? Well, I suppose I was, but... *Needless to say I didn’t join. That experience did make me wonder if this was the beginning of my decline though.*

In contrast, at 70 I was ecstatic to be called back into ministry, I felt like Moses! I was called to be minister of Hope Baptist Church at Hebden Bridge which I did for nearly 3 years – until a heart condition forced me to lay it down. That literally broke my heart, **there was so much left for me to do!**

Where did that leave me? Back in decline? Only God knows.

Three years later and three blue light trips to A&E, I’m still standing.

I now belong to a little church who don’t ask too much of me but often ask me, ‘Can we just run this past you?’ So, not quite in decline, just on a different stage of the journey. Being offered a different way to serve.

We each have our own story.

What can we say? That God hasn’t finished with us yet; and who knows what the future will bring? Maybe part of the wisdom that comes with maturity is the knowledge that we cannot do it all. **And actually we never could!**

Perhaps aging helps us to get it all in perspective. We

can realise that the work we have done, and the work we still have to do, however small and insignificant it seems, is God's work and what happens to it is in **God's hands not ours.**

I would like to finish by reflecting on some words by Oscar Romero.

It helps now and then to step back and take the long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

We plant seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted knowing they hold future promise.

We lay down foundations that will need further development far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realising that

This enables us to do something and do it very well.

It may be incomplete, a step along the way, an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

So whatever stage of life we are at, it is a privilege to be a part, even a small part, of building God's kingdom here on earth. There is still an adventure to be had, and God hasn't finished with us yet.

UPCOMING EVENTS FOR 2022

LATER LIFE EVENTS SERIES in partnership with *Growing Old Grace-fully*

Celebrating Later Life: This Jubilee tea party is on 16th June (2.30 – 4pm) at Wheeler Hall, St Anne's Street, Leeds, LS2 8BE

Losses and Later Life: Facing changes and challenges
12th July (10.30 – 12 noon) on Zoom

REFUGEE WEEK

During Refugee Week, the **Seeing Asylum** exhibition will be at St Aidan's Church, Elford Place, Harehills, LS8 5QD

Exhibition opens 3pm on Tuesday 21st June. Events on that day include:

Women and Asylum A public lecture given by Dr Victoria Canning, Senior Lecturer at University of Bristol at 4pm

Workshop using Victoria's Asylum Navigation Board at 5pm

Shared Meal from 6pm

Allerton Deanery Service at 7:30

The exhibition is also open Wednesday 22nd June from 10.30am to 1pm, Thursday 23rd June from 12 – 2pm, Friday 24th June from 4pm to 6pm and Saturday 25th June from 10.30am to 12pm. No need to book, just drop in.

UPCOMING EVENTS FOR 2022 CONTINUED...

FAITH AND CITY LIFE:

Book Launch for *Understanding and Managing Sophisticated and Everyday Racism. Implications for Education and Work* by Victoria Showunmi and Carol Tomlin.

Both authors will speak at the event and the respondent will be Revd Dr Ericsson Mapfumo. At 7 pm on Tuesday 5th July at St George's Centre, 60 Great George St, LS1 3DL

Book Launch for *Dawn of Sunday. The Trinity and Trauma-Safe Churches* by Joshua Cockayne, Scott Harrower and Preston Hill.

Authors and respondents will speak at the event. At 7.30pm on Thursday 7th July at Holy Trinity, Boar Lane, LS1 6HW

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