At the End of the Day

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At the End of the Day

Enjoying life in the departure lounge

David Winter

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Introduction

I can name, almost to the day, the moment when I reluctantly accepted that I was old—not 'senior' or 'mature', not elderly or getting on a bit, but old. It was in April 2012 and I was walking along the Broadway in my home town, Thatcham, in Berkshire. I glanced at a shop window and saw the reflection of an old man walking. As I put my head down into the wind (it was a very cold day), I realised with a shock that it was me.

So, I'm 'old'. It's not a term we like to apply to ourselves or even to others, although I shall unashamedly and proudly use it throughout this book. 'Old' was once a compliment and to be old an honoured achievement—indeed, the older the better. In any case, facts are facts. I have joined a large and growing segment of people in British society who (whatever euphemism we employ to disguise the fact) are indisputably old. No less than 1.4 million people in the UK are aged 85 or over, and that figure is set to rise year on year. Average life expectancy for men is now 78.2 years and for women 82.3, with the gap narrowing each year. Practically, it means that a man or woman who reaches 70 in reasonably good health will probably join the ranks of the octogenarians—and beyond. It is estimated that by 2020 there will be at least 20,000 centenarians in Britain. Buckingham Palace will be kept busy with all those cards of congratulation!

I remember, as a child, being taken by my parents to visit an elderly great-aunt who had reached her 90th birthday. My brothers and I were ushered into her presence to see this astonishing sight. What we actually gazed at was a crumpled

figure, eyes weak and watering, skin wrinkled and sallow, who couldn't hear what we said or see clearly enough to know who we were. More than anything else, it left us quite sure that whatever else happened to us, we didn't want to live to 90.

Yet now, in my usual seat in church, I have two 90-year-old ladies sitting behind me. They are lively and friendly, fully involved in all that goes on, not only in church but in the town and the world beyond. The contrast is astonishing—and they are not the only people of that age in the congregation. In my last parish there was a 90-year-old woman who regularly cycled to church (until she fell off and my wife persuaded her to accept a lift). Old age is no longer the prerogative of the favoured few and is not necessarily marked by physical or mental decay.

So, sooner or later, if we are 'spared', as my grandmother used to put it, we shall grow old. All the modern mantras about 70 being the 'new 60', all the oils and pills and Botox and all the amazing devices of the National Health Service cannot alter the date on my birth certificate. As my excellent GP put it as he checked my latest blood test, 'David, you may not look 82, but your kidneys are.' Oh, and not only my kidneys! The body I have lived in for four-score years frequently reminds me, rather like the ominous sounds from the engine or transmission of an old car, that the miles on the clock tell their story. So do the eyes and the ears and the lungs. If the bus beats me to the stop, I let it go. I've given up doing a geriatric sprint and spending the rest of the journey trying to get my breath back. After all, there'll be another one in 30 minutes, and what's that in the eyes of eternity?

This is not the attitude that has shaped most of my life. Time has been my dictator: the diary, the calendar, the

deadlines and the appointments. I remember now, with the fond acceptance of old age, that I am the rector who raged if the service started 30 seconds late, whose homily had to end as the church clock struck ten, whose proudest achievement in broadcasting was the boast that however bad the programme he produced, at least it started and ended on time.

Then and now

But now I am old. That was then, and this is now. Those readers of roughly my own age will know what I'm talking about in this book and will perhaps enjoy the telling, but I hope that those who are not quite there might value a positive peep into what lies ahead. In the wonderful television series *Outnumbered*, the mouthy little girl asked her grandpa, 'What's it like being old?' He paused and then replied, 'Well, it beats being dead.' Actually, I'm not sure it does, as we shall see, but like most people I'm not in a hurry to find out. Until that day, I simply go on experiencing yet another part of life's unstoppable roundabout—infancy, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, 'prime', middle age, seniority and then, if one is still on the wooden horse, old age. Each has its joys; each has its anxieties and stresses; each moves seamlessly into the next. Believe it or not, being old can be fun.

That last statement may seem incredible. We don't associate 'fun' with slowing down, with wonky knees and hips, forgetfulness, bladder problems, cataracts, hearing aids and incontinence pads, though the popular TV series *Getting On* suggests that they can provide a rich source of comedy. For my generation, those very things, so daunting when listed, can also be the raw material of endless banter and countless

anecdotes, to be told conspiratorially only among those for whom they are (or might soon be) the stuff of life. I honestly think I've laughed more since I was 80—often with my fellow octogenarians—than I did during my 20 years at the BBC.

Fair enough, you may think, but why would anyone who's not there yet want to know about it? Why, when life is good and its powers are at their zenith, should I want to think about anything as depressing as getting old?

In fact, until relatively modern times, old age was not regarded as depressing, but as a rich privilege, even a sign of divine blessing. It had its drawbacks but age was credited with wisdom born of experience, with patience and a kind of dignity. The really old were treated with something approaching awe.

Being old in the modern world

In contrast, the elderly in the modern Western world are regarded (even by themselves, sometimes) largely as problems, actual or potential. Apparently, there are simply too many of us. Commentators go on about the 'geriatric explosion' as though somewhere a horde of crazed octogenarians are about to launch a bomb into our well-ordered society. Why should anyone want to explore being old when it involves such public disapproval?

People are living longer and that inevitably means there will be increased demands on the health service, sheltered housing and care homes. Pension schemes are stretched by the obstinate refusal of old people to die and so help to keep their funds in balance. No one has yet proposed a cull of all those over a certain age (although the film *Logan's Run*, about 30 years ago, was based on precisely that premise). All

the same, it's sometimes difficult for the elderly not to feel that they are, if not an intolerable burden, at least a bit of a nuisance and a serious drain on society's resources.

This is not simply a matter of finance, needless to say. Families face the problem of an elderly grandparent who is no longer capable of caring for herself. Hospitals face the problem of 'bed-blocking' by elderly patients who can't be sent home but don't really need to be in hospital. If all of that is what being old entails, we may ask, why concern ourselves with it before we get there? 'Sufficient unto the day…' and all that.

Fortified by pills from the doctor and an occasional hospital visit for running repairs, we who are indisputably old may not feel that we shall ever be a burden (or a 'bed-blocker'), though one never knows, of course. Indeed, the great majority of old people do not end up in nursing homes and many of us would say that life is as fulfilling now as it was 30 years ago, while being profoundly different. The premise of this book, put simply, is that if you find you are still here, it's best to make the most of it—and that 'the most of it' is not as awful as anticipation might suggest. I suppose a third premise must be confessed. I think that faith (to be defined later) is very often the key to a fulfilling old age.

Geraphobia

Despite that, most of us, at some time in our lives, experience 'gerophobia', the fear of being old. Its most obvious symptoms are cosmetic: for men, Viagra, the 'cures' for baldness and shampoos to darken the hair; for women—well, where do we start? There is a whole industry geared to persuading women that they can delay or even permanently repel the

tide of the years or, at any rate, their outward symptoms. Advertisements promise everything from the eradication of wrinkles to a completely 'new' face, firm and youthful. Men as well as women are persuaded to embark on costly and risky surgery to correct the visible evidence of the passing years. 'For 20 grand,' someone said to me recently, 'you can look 20 years younger', but there is no sum of money that can actually reverse the calendar. We are what we are.

In the same hopeless cause, older men and women are tempted to ape the styles, customs and vocabulary of the young. Perhaps if the skirt is short enough, the jeans tight enough, the tattoos vivid enough, we shall be accepted as members of the younger set. If we can Tweet and do Facebook, if we can name a favourite band (preferably a rather rude one), if we can use the strange language of the networking age with its LOLs and BTWs, we might be accepted as full members of contemporary society rather than washed-out spectators on its shore. Just for the record, I've tried most of them and they don't really work.

In parallel, we have a general reluctance to use the vocabulary of age about ourselves or those whose approval we cherish. We become 'senior citizens', the people of the 'third age', 'retired' but definitely not out. That's fair enough, I suppose, but it does imply that actually to be 'old' is an unmentionable fate.

All of this contributes to our fear of age. This is not the same thing as the fear of dying (though they may sometimes be connected). It is more to do with our sense of self-worth, the product of a culture that has forgotten how to respect old age and how to approach it positively. It is fear of vulnerability, of helplessness, of diminution and loss of respect and status. Yet at 82 I am still the same person as

I was at 22, 42 and 62. The body creaks, the memory is sometimes a bit sluggish (like an overworked computer), but the character they serve is still here, distinct and individual, replete with the memories of all those years but living now.

Of course, what we know about being old is based either on our own experience of it (if we've reached that stage in life) or what we have learnt from the experiences of others. One thing is certain, though: what we are in old age is shaped, to a greater or lesser extent, by what we have been through all the earlier episodes of life.

The amazing television documentary most recently entitled *56 Up* has followed the lives of a carefully selected group of children from the time they were seven in 1963. In 2012 they had reached 56, hence the title. Every seven years it has tracked them down and recorded their experiences, feelings, joys and tragedies. It has been a powerful reminder that, like it or not, we are shaped by our 'lived history'. The adolescent is shaped by his or her childhood, the adult by adolescent experience, the middle-aged by their experience of adulthood. Some have encountered major changes in life, even profound transformations of personality. Yet it is still fundamentally true, as Tennyson puts it in the mouth of Ulysses, that 'I am a part of all that I have been' (*Poems*, 1842). At 80 I don't become someone else.

Life experience

That's why it seemed right to start this book with a quick reprise of my own life experience, because clearly that has shaped not only who I have been but who I am now. It also colours my perception of old age (and hence these pages). The reader is surely entitled to know what I bring into the

final baggage hall of life, what influences have led to my life choices and shape my view of the present (and the future).

The 'experience of others' is, in a way, trickier. Many—probably most—great writers have offered insights into what old age is like or would be like. They will surface in this book from time to time, but I shall take as my first spreadsheet, as it were, the story of age as recounted in the books of the Bible. After all, there is no more extensive record of human experience anywhere in literature than that offered by the often anonymous writers of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. They cover, in story, poetry and chronicle, over three millennia of human history, from the nomadic days of the early patriarchs through to the subtle and sophisticated influences of classic Greco-Roman culture. I'm not turning to them, in this instance, to expound divine law or promote Christian doctrine, but as memorable and illuminating stories from the distant past of our race, which offer fascinating insights into what it has always meant to people to be old.

We shall find that, in ancient times, old age was treated with deference. No one seems to have noted that old people can be awkward, forgetful, untidy and even occasionally smelly. It is a sanitised picture—or perhaps a spiritualised one, because the elderly were seen as receptacles of rich blessing. Nevertheless, the ancient world, the world of the patriarchs, prophets and evangelists, was also brutally frank about two things. Firstly, old age brings responsibility. Secondly, it inevitably ends in physical decline and death. Those are insights that today's world cannot afford to ignore, however much it may wish to.

To that record we shall need to add the experience of today, the changed perceptions and circumstances brought about by where we are and the sort of society we live in now.

But those insights and stored wisdom are for later. For now, let me offer a brief sketch of the circumstances, ideas and people who have shaped my own life. After all, it's the only one I know 'from the inside'.

1

Meet the old man

I was born in 1929, the year of the Wall Street Crash, probably the worst financial catastrophe of the 20th century. I spent my early childhood in Wood Green, a nondescript suburb of north London, now part of the London Borough of Haringey. I was the middle one of three sons. My father was a clerk in the Ministry of Labour, as it was then called. My mother, in the manner of the time, ran the home.

In 1939 I was evacuated, along with the rest of the school (including my five-year-old brother), to a village in Essex, but, when an invasion from the Continent seemed likely, our parents wisely decided that a location right in the path of the oncoming German army seemed a touch impractical and arranged for us to go and live with my grandparents in rural central Wales.

When I say 'rural', I mean it: the house was two up, two down, with no piped water, no flushing toilets, no electricity or telephones. Yet those few years were wonderfully rewarding to me. I came to appreciate the beauty of our surroundings, the richness of the simple life, the fun of the outdoors and the wonderful sense of a small but close-knit community of people who really cared for each other. As a bonus, I learnt to speak Welsh—my grandmother's native tongue and the language of the village school, even for learning sums. I went on to the grammar school in the nearest town, Machynlleth, coming back to London only when my parents decided that

the air raids were a thing of the past. In fact, I came home to Wood Green to be greeted by Hitler's 'secret weapons', his last desperate throw of the dice—the V1 and V2 rockets.

National Service followed (as an RAF nursing assistant) and, after that, university, at King's College, London, where I read English. That was hardly onerous for a young man who simply loved words. An important event during my student days was an experience of Christian conversion, which has remained with me all my life and has largely shaped it from then on.

Before I reached the end of the course at King's, my father died—the long-term victim of gassing 35 years earlier during World War I. After university (and the Post-Graduate Education Certificate) I taught for five years, in Hertfordshire and then back in London, while harbouring desperate hopes of a career one day in journalism.

I did quite a lot of freelance writing, and then, like a favour from the Good Fairy, a phone call offered me the post of editor of Britain's first full-colour glossy Christian magazine, *Crusade*. (You wouldn't call it that now!) Within a year I was married to Christine, a young community nurse. I had eleven years working at *Crusade*, until eventually another late-flowering ambition was realised and a phone call recruited me as a producer in the religious broadcasting department of BBC Radio. The department had launched a weekly religious news magazine programme, *Sunday*, and journalistic help was welcome.

I stayed at the BBC for 20 years, as producer, editor, television producer and finally Head of Religious Broadcasting. It was sometimes hectic, sometimes fraught and generally satisfying, in a high-tension kind of way. Sadly, work meant that I saw a great deal less of our family (two sons and a

daughter) than I would have liked, but we had acquired a holiday cottage in Wales (where else?) and we all spent time there whenever gaps appeared in the diary.

From my student days and the dawn of a committed Christian faith, I had admitted the possibility that ordination might lie ahead for me at some point, but by now I was in my 50s. Surely I'd missed that particular bus? It was our area bishop, Bill Westwood, who persuaded me that with God it is never 'too late'. I went to a selection conference, was recommended for training and, in 1985, enrolled in the part-time ordination course at Oak Hill Theological College, London. The course completed, and with Christine's enthusiastic agreement, I took (slightly) early retirement from the BBC and we moved to Oxfordshire to start yet another career—this time, together (Christine was a licensed lay minister).

My eleven years as a parish priest were, without a shadow of a doubt, the happiest and most fulfilling of my life. The very things that, for years, had made me question my aptitude for priesthood turned out to be those that I found most rewarding—being with people at crucial moments in their lives, helping men and women to find faith, praying with the sick and ministering to the dying. In an odd kind of way, I feel that in my 60s I finally grew up.

That brings the story of my life to the year 2000, when I retired from licensed ministry. I've continued to take services, lead retreats, baptise, marry and conduct funerals: until he or she can't stand up any longer, a priest will always have such opportunities, and, as a late starter, I cherish them. Christine died in 2001, before we could enjoy the full fruits of retirement together. By then we had two lovely grandchildren.

What do I do now? I suppose one answer is, I'm simply here, with memories and recollected joys, living (so far) in my own little house, not far from my daughter and her family. She is rector of six nearby parishes, not having prevaricated as long as her father about responding to the call. I write rather a lot, do a little broadcasting from time to time, but most of all enjoy some of the simplicity I found long ago in rural Wales.

This, of course, is only the story of events. Life is much more than that, and a true picture of a whole personality can't be summarised in a list of schools, qualifications, jobs, family, health and so on. My personal picture must include a love of words (poetry, drama, novels, biography), the lifeblood of friendship, love and family, and the rich blessing of faith. I've always been a bit impatient and am now rapidly becoming a Grumpy Old Man. I like sport—cricket and football to watch, but once upon a time I played hockey quite seriously. My musical tastes are broad and probably sentimental, if I'm honest—grand opera, Mendelssohn and Rachmaninov, the Beach Boys, Bee Gees and Westlife. I also like television comedy and Alan Ayckbourn plays at the theatre.

Nothing in the week, in my dotage, surpasses the Sunday morning Eucharist, however. In a new way, heaven opens and I feel absolutely at home.

That's more or less where I am as I write this book. I appreciate that I have had many opportunities in life that have been denied to others. Some of those reading my story will feel that it's the record of someone determined to have a public role, for all my talk of simplicity. I think I might agree. I have made many blunders and let many people down. But it is me, and that is the 'me' who is now looking at what it means for 'me'—and my readers—to be old.

Alongside personal experience, the basic resource of this book, as I have said, is the Bible. That long record of human experience offers no single pattern or programme for old age. The people in it lived their lives as we live ours. You are you, as I am me, and they are characters from a vast archive, distant in time but profoundly human. We can recognise the hallmarks. Our shared humanity means that, at some point, all experiences of life, including those of being old, will reflect common elements—bits and pieces of the private picture that are, in fact, public possessions.

In any case, the time has come to put my own story in a drawer and bring out instead the wisdom of the ancients and the experience of the longer vision. I start with the stories of old people that we find in the Bible, both the Old Testament and the New, and ask what they reveal about the way being old was understood in those far-off times and also whether they offer a particular—or indeed universal—insight into what it means to be old.

2

The pitcher is broken at the fountain

Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them'; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return with the rain; in the day when the guards of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the women who grind cease working because they are few, and those who look through the windows see dimly; when the doors on the street are shut, and the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; when one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because all must go to their eternal home, and the mourners will go about the streets; before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it.

ECCLESIASTES 12:1–7

Perhaps because I love poetry or possibly because, throughout life, I've liked to leave the nicest bits till last (eat the crust, then the jam), I've chosen to turn first not to the stories of the long-lived patriarchs and the awestruck reverence with

which the ancient world viewed old age, but instead to a beautiful, wistful but ultimately rather gloomy picture of what it means to be old. It's found towards the end of the book of Ecclesiastes (the title means 'Preacher'). The writer depicts human life as 'vanity' and human effort as pointless striving against the inevitable. The pleasure that God does give lies in our toil, in our glimpses of ultimate truth and in obedience to the voice of his wisdom.

Then, right at the end of his book, the Preacher addresses his younger readers, urging them to find that divine wisdom before it is too late, because lying ahead of them is the dreadful spectre of decline, decay and death. It's a miserable theme but the language is memorable and disturbingly perceptive. We sense that the writer knows what he's talking about from personal experience.

In a series of metaphors he describes the effects of ageing, so cleverly that a casual reader might miss some of the points altogether. Hebrew scholars have disputed the meaning of some of his metaphorical images but the overall theme is clear enough. The catalogue of decline is precise and horribly familiar to most of us who are old.

First of all we have the bald statement that the time will come when we can't see any pleasure to be gained from the passing days. The Preacher then describes a growing difficulty in distinguishing objects, even those as obvious as moon, stars and sun. Then there are the trembling limbs ('the guards of the house'), back trouble ('the strong men are bent') and the loss of teeth ('the women who grind… are few'). The voice becomes squeaky like a bird's and hearing declines so that it's as if the sounds on the street are being heard through a closed door. The elderly become unsteady on their feet and tend to fall over, so going outdoors

becomes hazardous. The hair (if we've got any) goes white like an almond tree in blossom. 'The grasshopper drags itself along'—a suitably obscure metaphor that Jewish rabbis have traditionally applied to sexual impotence, likening the droopy grasshopper to a by-now-useless male organ.

The picture of decline ends, of course, in the only way possible—death. All must go to their eternal home and the mourners must go about the streets. The images of brokenness multiply. Precious things, sources of life and beauty—golden bowls, pitchers, silver cords, cistern wheels—are all broken and useless. Finally the body itself joins them. Made of dust, it returns to the dust, and the breath that God gave it returns to its source. 'Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity' (v. 8).

It's an uncompromising end to an uncompromising book. In the long experience of life and death that the Bible chronicles, this is its most pessimistic moment—though even here there constantly lurks the presence and voice of God, the giver (and taker) of life. It seemed to me a suitably robust and painfully honest start to our investigation into the way the Hebrew and Christian scriptures deal with these issues. No one can accuse the old Preacher of offering 'pie in the sky when you die'. For him, there isn't much pie down here to start with.

We must set it in context, of course. At this stage in the development of the Jewish faith, there was little notion of life beyond death. The dead simply went to Sheol, the 'pit'. No one seemed to know exactly what that meant, but one psalmist took the view that its residents were in effect non-persons: 'I am counted among those who go down to the Pit; I am like those who have no help, like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom

you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand' (Psalm 88:4–5).

There are hints of something more hopeful, including the frequent Old Testament description of so-and-so 'going to their fathers', but no coherent belief in an afterlife. That belief does not emerge until the writings of the great Hebrew prophets, notably Daniel, Ezekiel and Isaiah, several centuries later. By the time of Jesus, resurrection (at the 'last day') was the received faith of most Jews, the Sadducees being the notable exceptions. Belief in resurrection was not articulated in the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch), which was why the Sadducees rejected it.

That is the biblical context. The historical context is of a society where remedies that today's advanced world takes for granted were unknown— opticians, dentists, physiotherapy, hearing aids and drugs to combat or hold back conditions like dementia or palsy. The old were sheltered in the bosom of the extended family, fed, cared for and respected but not expected to do much at all (beyond giving the next generation the finest jewels of their hard-earned wisdom, of course). That was more or less the lot of the elderly until modern times, and there are many pictures of it in characters in novels and plays. Perhaps the best-known is Shakespeare's 'Seven ages of man' speech in *As You Like It*, which lists the various stages of life and describes the final one—that of second childhood—as being 'sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything'.

This does not mean that the ancient poem in Ecclesiastes is irrelevant to readers today. The truth is that decline—physical and mental—is built into our DNA. Our world may be better at warding off its symptoms but they are still ultimately irresistible. It is sheer delusion to imagine that advancing

years do not take their toll of energy, mental agility and bodily strength. A contented old age is not achieved by pretending that things are not as they are or will not follow their natural course. There are, as we shall see, compensations—very considerable ones—to being old, but they are balanced with penalties, as our experience from childhood to old age tells us that each stage of life will bring.

Eventually, as Ecclesiastes so eloquently puts it, the 'silver cord' is broken. The aged body with all its infirmities goes to its 'eternal home' and the mourners gather in the street. The body gives back its precious handful of dust to the earth and the lungs breathe their last: the 'spirit' returns to its Giver. There is a kind of completeness here, but, taken at face value, nothing to make being old seem anything but a preparation for being dead.

The difference between this poem in Ecclesiastes and a contemporary one in Sumerian culture is the mysterious and constant presence of God through the whole process. The One who first gave the gift of life seems to brood over its existence. The young man to whom the poem is addressed must 'remember his Creator' and it is the Creator who gathers up the dust and the spirit at the end of the earthly journey. Perhaps, at that stage in history, no one really knew what he was planning to do with them, but God does not die and his purposes are not limited by the span of a human life. I think even the first readers of this poem sensed that there was more to the story than decline, decay and death.