
AGEING
On The Dark Side

by

Brenda Burkitt

Why do you ask for **positive** experiences of ageing? That dreadful illusion of the ancient, wise, fun-loving, 90-year-old whom all flock to talk to is the worst confidence-trick of the humanistic movement. The reality is, at best, a fierce spirit locked up in a failing body, legs don't hold you up, eyes failing, hearing almost gone, afraid to go out because you keep falling over or because you need to urinate every few moments; struggling to get dressed in the morning, undressed at night, poor and unrefreshing sleep, loneliness because all your friends have died.

Even worse is a fit body but the mind going. Either a constant fight and permanent anxiety because the memory fails all the time and everything has to be checked and counter-checked a hundred times, or else you forget to take the pills, keep the appointment, stay in on the one day a visitor is coming; watching the memory get worse all the time. Or, the ultimate degradation, dementia. Those you used to love become mysterious, threatening strangers and the world is full of incomprehensible happenings. If it meant oblivion, it wouldn't be so bad, but even at the worst, there is the occasional moment where you know how awful everything is.

One in five of us will end up dementing. If we live beyond 70, most of us will watch the memory declining. If a terminal illness does not carry us off, (and in the old, illness takes a long time to kill you), we will watch our limbs and senses disintegrating. As we get more frail and cut off by blindness and deafness, we cannot make new friends, old ones die (the lucky ones), we are grateful for the social worker who is the only person to talk to.

And how about incontinence? No longer able, or even willing to shit politely? Who is going to clear up after you with a good grace? A very few, incredibly fortunate, people escape this and enjoy extreme old age. Often they have smoked, drunk, eaten meat out of aluminium saucepans and never meditated. Apart from generally looking after myself in a sensible way so that I can enjoy the time I do have before senility sets in, I can't see any recipe which can aid escape from the inevitable. A good constitution helps, and your choice of parents has an influence.

The pretence that old age can inevitably be civilized and gracious has taken over the function of the myth of life after death. It helps us avoid living **now**, appreciating our

wonderful bodies, our acute senses,
doing what we yearn to do now, not
putting it off until there is time.
There is no time. Realistic

assessment of what lies ahead of us
can liberate us from the tyranny of
the future.

ORGANIZATIONS AND CONTACTS

Accommodation

Abbeyfield Society 186 Darkes Lane, Potters Bar Herts EN6 1AB:
070744845 To provide those who are elderly and alone with homes,
within the companionship of small households.

Individual Help and Advice

Contact 15, Henrietta Street, Covent Garden London WC2E 8QH:
01-240-0630. To encourage social contact between old people and
volunteers.

Counsel and Care for the Elderly, 131 Middlesex Street London E1
7JF: 01-247-9844. To provide a free advisory and counselling service
to the elderly.

Extend, 3 The Boulevard, Sheringham Norfolk. NR26 8LJ. 0263-822479
Exercise training for the elderly with musical accompaniment.

National Council for Carers and their Elderly Dependents, 29 Chilworth
Mews London W2 3RG. 01-262-1451. To help carers who have or had
the care of elderly dependents.

Royal United Kingdom Beneficent Association, 6 Avonmore Road
London W14 8RL. 01-602-6274. To grant annuities to elderly profes-
sional people in need.

Third Age Trust, 6 Parkside Gardens London SW19 5EY. 01-947-0401.
To promote self-help educational activities and groups.

Promotion and Public Relations

Age Concern England, 60 Pitcairn Road, Mitcham Surrey. CR4 3LL.
01-640-5431. To promote the welfare of elderly people and workers
with or for the elderly.