



Stream of Life

Vivian Milroy in
conversation with John
Ridpath

Vivian You wanted to hear what I thought about death, and I'm afraid the answer is that I practically never think about death. If pushed I would say that it will be time enough for that when it happens. And, do I have any idea how it could be? Only a very misty distant scenario when I'm somewhere between 110 and 120 and there's a kind of fading out: I've done everything I wanted to do, or thought about doing, and over time I've quietly withdrawn into myself and one night, I just stay there.

J Would you give us a quick idea of your background and history?

Vivian I see my life as very much in the present: there's a bright light and a reality around this moment – like the raindrops on the window and you sitting there and the machine ticking away. An hour ago is a bit faded, and five years ago is something in a story-book. Anyway, I can remember I was born 80 years ago in a little village in Essex called Langdon Hills. My father was the lay preacher in a tiny hamlet three miles away from where my maternal grandparents lived, and the name of that little hamlet was Basildon. So my little Basildon is now a great conurbation and the house where I was born, and the one we moved to when I was five or six, are both rubble under the ring road. School – local council school and the grammar school nine miles away in Grays where I cycled most days.

J I know you spent five and a half years in the war. And you married and ran an engineering works.

Vivian For 25 years. My first career was in theatre, then television, then films. And then my father died and that put me in the engineering business, during which time I dabbled with humanistic psychology and psychotherapy and enjoyed myself in other fields, including starting *Self & Society* and getting an honours degree with the Open University, mainly in psychology.

J You have grandchildren?

Vivian Three granddaughters and two grandsons: advertising, textile design college, A-levels, commercial artist in Johannesburg, and computer whiz kid in London respectively.

J Does this mean a great deal to you?

Vivian Yes, it was fun when they were children. But with ages from 18 to 32 they're more like intimate but distant friends. Which I value.

J You had a long operation ...

Vivian Five and a half hours.

J Do you have any predominant memories about it?

Vivian I suppose mainly the people, doctors, nurses, ancillaries, other victims. I took my camera with me and have a lot of pictures, unfortunately not of the operation itself. But I got a picture of the surgeon and his team afterwards. Those are my main memories – and my sense of taste was completely distorted. Nothing tasted right for weeks afterwards.

J But what about your memories of having your life in danger?

Vivian I really do believe that these things aren't going to happen to me. I really enjoyed my time in hospital: different world, different people, and me in an entirely different role. If I peer back into the darkness, there are moments of worrying pain, incredible and inexplicable weakness in my body: these memories I have left behind. The person who really suffered was my poor wife.

J For myself in coming to terms with my ageing process, withdrawing from active life is difficult. I find it hard to deal with old angers.

Vivian I always found difficulty in finding new angers. The number of terrible arguments I had in groups with people saying, 'You must be angry. Why can't you get in touch with your anger? Get your anger out!' And I never seemed to have any anger. However, I was a beastly teenager. I kicked things. I shouted. It wasn't much fun.

J So you felt you'd already let go of your anger and got through it. I think I tend to go to the other extreme. I get a self-image as the wise old man with a beautiful beard.

Vivian I seem to be stuck with an image of myself as a slightly rebellious teenager.

J Without the anger?

Vivian I got tired of it. This later image is just a couple of years older than the one with the tantrums. In a way I've never quite grown up. I don't judge it. It's just the way I am.

J Do you have any problems with your memory? When I used to forget my way to somewhere I'd been a hundred times before, or when I couldn't remember the name of someone I'd known for years. I used to get terribly worried about it – about five years ago when I was 60-something. Now I think 'What does it matter?'

Vivian I would go along with that. I forget a lot of things. I forget people's names. I forget psychological theories, the right words for truths that I have known for years. Can't put them into words. I'm prepared to live with it.

J How do you feel about the shrinkage in your friendship circle?

Vivian There are sadnesses there. The first thing I read in the paper is the obituary column. And it's amazing the number of people I'm ticking off. I started making lists: of the people who were with me at RADA in 1937, the people I knew in the war, early days in the BBC and the early days in AHP. They disappear. There's a profound sense of loss, but I don't spend too much time thinking about it.

J Do you think that there's a sense of greater equanimity as you grow older?

Vivian Yes, I think so. A slowing down.

J And do you have any regular practices for your mental health, meditation?

Vivian Fairly infrequently ... 'should do more', one voice says. Buddhist meditation, simple breathing exercises, and awareness of the inside, awareness of the outside. Little, and not very often. I'm a great one for using what's there. If I'm waiting for a bus, for example, I do a slow walking meditation, partly to use up the time and partly to check that I can still do it. And if no one is looking I can go into the tattered remnants of my Tai Chi form.

J Have you ever had a near-death experience? When they were chopping you up, maybe?

Vivian No. I hoped to be able to float on to the ceiling, but nothing happened.

J Christianne Heal used to do Death and Dying workshops.

Vivian I did one and found it very exciting. I particularly remember writing down all the good things and people you cherish, all the good things of your life – and then you ritually burn the piece of paper and imagine it all disappearing. It doesn't sound very exciting now, but it was at the time. And little of the message has stayed with me. I still collect books, hoard things that might come in useful.

J Do you have any expectations after death – reincarnation for example?

Vivian I quite like the idea of reincarnation, provided one moves the right way, gets the right part. It could be very interesting, but I'll wait and see. I can believe almost anything.

J What about the fundamental Buddhist idea of letting go – dying from moment to moment?

Vivian Letting go – very much so. But it doesn't mesh with dying. I feel it more as floating along a stream of life. I'm very much taken with Castaneda's concept of 'not doing', that is letting go in order to experience 'being' more vividly. I think living in the here and now is desperately important.

J Why 'desperately'?

Vivian Because there is a kind of despair about not being fully awake to life. It's rather like that theory of education: that education is what is left after you've forgotten everything you've been taught. So I think tricks, techniques, formulae can be useful as a kind of intermediate process. Once you've got there, you don't need them. That is why I think of myself as a yogin although it's several years since I practised yoga formally. Nor do I 'practise' 'not doing'. I just live my life.

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