

THE ART OF AGEING WELL

By Yehuda Tagar¹

A few days ago I gave a lecture on the topic of how to age well to the group of holocaust survivors in Bratislava, to whom I present various topics from time to time upon request, as I admire their heroism and spiritual resilience. The group includes people in their 80's and 90's, and a few years ago I would not accept such a topic of presentation to my elders. But now, in my mid-60's I felt that I started to be qualified for it. After 30 years of counselling people from age 3 to 83 in more than 10 countries and recently becoming more aware of my own ageing process – I took up this challenge. I did not touch topics which are not directly in the individual's control such as material conditions, family relationship, medical conditions and medicine. I touched on what potentially depends on the individual initiative alone. This article is based on that talk in late September.

We are ageing from the moment we are born. The most predictable element in human life is the cycle of growing, aging and dying. We must be fundamentally equipped for this challenge, yet facing it fully and honestly is a threshold for everyone. How long we live is not in our control, but the quality of our life while we live – is to a huge extent, at least potentially, in our control. I identified seven factors from what I know at this point in my life that could make major contributions to the prospect of ageing well. The order of the elements is not essential.

First, as outer pressures, expectations and functions are progressively being released in mature age – the motivation to live is moving from the outside to the inside. We have to find our own reason to get out of bed in the morning and have another day in our life: a reason to live that we initiate ourselves. Without it life can become just a losing game. An old Chinese proverb says that if you have one cent – buy a piece of bread so you can live. But if you have a second cent – buy a flower, so you may have a reason to live. There can be no generalisation about what such a reason might be for individuals as this is very personal. But in mature age the world will not give it to you. They will expect less and less from you. Victor Frankle discovered through his experience as a prisoner in Auschwitz that those prisoners who found and maintained a meaning and a purpose for their life – survived, at least in maintaining their humanity. Create a purpose, a meaning, a motivation, an occupation, an interest, a dedication, something that gives a purpose for your day.

Second – challenge yourself. Comfort as a lifestyle is a death process for a living human being. Here is the new concept of the '*Super-Agers*': researchers at the Harvard-affiliated Massachusetts General Hospital found to their surprise that the health, strength and function of the limbic brain of some elderly people in their 70's is equal to those of much younger people, not because of genetics but because of activity. They concluded that those who keep challenging themselves in mature age to get out of their safety comfort zone and to take up a new challenge – they keep vitalising these crucial regions of the human brain, keep them alive and healthy. The challenge could be cognitive, like learning a new language,

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emotional – like renewing a relationship, artistic, like starting to play a new instrument or painting, or physical, like taking up a greater stretch of fitness. The common denominator of the ‘superagers’ is that they keep challenging themselves. The brain and the whole body respond in greater vitality². So, again, comfort kills, and challenge revitalises, especially in mature age.

Thirdly – food matters. Its quality and quantity have an enormous effect on our health and vitality. There is no universal agreement about the ideal diet. Opinions verge to the extreme in popular science and in academia. There are so many opposing opinions about diet in the public domain – that people have to make up their own mind individually. What can guide us in this? The human physical body is the wisest apparatus on Earth. The more you listen to the body – the more you will be informed about your ideal diet. We have become very individualised in recent decades, what is right for one is wrong for another and what is right for you in one phase in your life – may not be ideal for the next phase. By listening to the body I do not mean just the appetite, the taste buds, the hunger and the stomach’s desire to be full, but listening to the whole body and its subtle messages. Over-eating is killing our people. Just look around you and you will see that between 60% and 80% of men over 40 are overweight or obese. This is a worldwide epidemic. If you are overweight it means that something drives you to eat which is not the body’s real need. It is something else. Find out what it is and address it differently. Just applying more consciousness and deeper connection to your body will improve your health. Make sure that your consciousness, not your appetite – controls your eating habits.

Fourthly – gratitude. As we grow old there are more and more things that go wrong in our bodies and our lives become more limited as we keep losing capacities. That, in itself, is depressing, and we can easily become bitter and sorry for ourselves. This tendency must be balanced with its opposite for us to remain mentally alive, and the opposite of bitterness and depression is gratitude. Gratitude is food for the human soul. It clears, enlivens and uplift the soul like water does to a thirsty body. It is too important to live it for chance. Gratitude can be cultivated consciously. There is so much to be grateful for: the rich life that we lived, what we have created, our children, nature, the sunrise itself. Old people who live in appreciation of their lives shine and radiate even as they are growing older.

Then come the eternal values that cannot die. On the physical level the dying process is going to win and there is nothing we can do about it. It is in the original contract of being born into life that we will also exit it. There is no denying that on the physical level ageing is a dying process. But the physical is only one level of human life. As we grow old we have a better chance of shifting our focus from the values that are temporary and perishable – to the values that have eternal value, that cannot die. The more we focus on human qualities that have lasting values – the more we are overcoming death inside: Love, wisdom, kindness, truth, sacrifice, creativity, faith, dedication, courage, forgiveness, prayer, blessings. These things cannot die. The more we are identified with them – the more we are liberated from the tyranny of death, the more we find within ourselves that which cannot die. As our relationship to death changes – our quality of life changes also. As the poet Dylan Thomas said: “..... *though lovers be lost – love shall not; /And death shall have no dominion*”.

² Youthful Brains in Older Adults: Preserved Neuroanatomy in the Default Mode and Salience Networks Contributes to Youthful Memory in Superageing: Felicia W. Sun, Michael R. Stepanovic, Joseph Andreano, Lisa Feldman Barrett, Alexandra Touroutoglou and Bradford C. Dickerson/ Journal of Neuroscience 14 September 2016, 36 (37) 9659-9668; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1523/JNEUROSCI.1492-16.2016>

Number six in this list is the body itself: it is an instrument of movement and of expression. A non-movement lifestyle is death to the body at any age. Its whole structure of muscles and ligaments and bones and joints and blood vessels and nerves is designed to function in movement. If you wish to live – move. Any movement is better than no movement. When we do not move and do not use this amazing instrument – it gets the message that its services are no longer needed, and it starts to pack up, disappear and dysfunction. Do not say “when I was young I moved”; move – and be young. It does not matter if you do fitness exercises, run, dance, Tai Chi, move freely with music, or walk in nature. All of it is good, as it uses the body the way it is designed to be used. A living body moves; a moving body lives.

Number seven in this list (a very incomprehensible list) is what I may call ‘soul hygiene’: taking care of the psychological clearing as much as we take care of our physical hygiene. Emotions are like food for the soul and moving on from emotional negativity is like having a shower. If you use your kitchen for more than a day and you do not clean it – it starts to be chaotic. If you use it for a week without cleaning it – it becomes unusable. That much is obvious. But if you keep anger, reaction, bitterness, negativity, aggression, insult, ill-wishes, judgement, blaming, accusations, communication blocks with dear ones – all these and more are very human but also very toxic. And toxicity of the soul becomes toxicity of the body. Not all the oxidant, pollutants and the acidity that destroy our bodies come from the external food chain. Some of it is self-produced by the ‘internal food chain’. We can clear the body externally, we can clear the blood internally and we can also clear the soul consciously. Yes, a conscious process and initiative are required in order to practically do such inner cleaning, but if the intention is there – the right process will be found. Actual forgiveness is a good starting point for it.

These are the seven factors which I listed as major contributors to the art of ageing well. There are many more and priorities differ for different people. There are many other factors of health and healthy ageing. But the ones on the above list do not depend on any external factor. You can do them yourself.

The better our quality of ageing – the better is our contribution to our community. About 70% of all health cost budgets in developed countries is spent on the oldest 10% of the population, and Europe is ageing fast. Some of this cost is inevitable. Some of it results from self-neglect and lack of education that encourages people to be their own first physicians and healers. I hope this article is a practical contribution in this direction.