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## Being old in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – the elder person's perspective

I wrote a book about old age when I was 80, believing that being 80 would give me credibility with my readers. But I also secretly thought that at 80 I knew everything there was to be known about old age. I have had seriously to revise that opinion, as I've made my way further through the decade.

What I've discovered is that as you get further into your 80s old age, rather like winter, tends to become more severe. But what I want to share with you is that I have discovered as I make my way over these past seven years that against all odds - and all expectations of myself, given my temperament – I have changed in attitude and in behaviour, in quite a few things. I didn't expect that to happen.

I thought I would share just two things, although there are others. The first has to do with the fact that when you get old, some people tend to patronise you. I used to find this very hard to take. I noticed they used a rather different tone of voice. They spoke more slowly and a little more loudly. Sometimes it was a tone of voice that was alarmingly like the way people speak to children.

I used to take great exception to this, interiorly, and I think it showed in writing my book, where I gave lots of examples. I believe the disabled have been telling us about this for years – this experience of feeling that they were being talked down to. Some people do tend to think, as they see you declining physically and becoming more decrepit on the outside, that it must be also affecting you up top. And that therefore they've got to be more careful.

But the old, I've discovered, can take quite a different attitude towards this. As I've made my way through my 80s, I've found that no longer do I hear the patronising edge in the tone. I hear rather the kindness behind it, the concern and the desire to help. And I've found it quite transforming to change in this way.

When I'm in the shop these days, the woman at the counter often looks across the heads of all her other customers and says, 'Are you all right over there, love?' Once I would have bristled. But I've discovered now I'm actually quite grateful because, nine times out of ten, I'm not all right. And I'm very glad of the implication in the voice that help is on its way.

I test all these things out once a month at least, during my cooking week, when I do my shopping at the local supermarket for our community. There was a time when I used to take my magnifying glass with me, and I would be peering at the prices and checking the various brand names, very independent and not a little self-righteous, and getting more irritable by the moment. Now I never dream of taking my magnifying glass, because I've changed my behaviour in this matter. I treat everybody in that supermarket as my sister and brother who are ready to help me, and I have discovered that that's exactly what they are.

I try to choose people who would feel they would be least likely to be asked by an old woman to help her. I love tattoos, or the 14-year-old boy who's making his grumpy way round the supermarket. And I say, 'Would you mind reading for me what's on that notice up there? I have very bad sight.' The boy will gather himself together and he'll read it for me, and he'll stand looking at me, as much as to say, 'Is there anything else I can do?'

So my discovery in this period since I wrote my book is that there is out there in the community a wonderful reservoir of kindness directed towards us old people, if we'll tap into it and express our need.

The other area of my life where I can perceive change and development is in my spiritual life. I have found that as my physical life goes downhill and becomes more derelict my spiritual life can, in inverse proportion, grow and blossom. I thought I would share with you my particular form of nourishing my spiritual life, because it has become very much the spirituality of my old age. I take just two events from the gospel.

One is where Jesus told us to call God our father. I'm absolutely certain that if Jesus lived in our time, with our cultural differences, he would tell us also to call God our mother. Because all he is telling us is that our relationship is one of a parent and a child. So it's a love relationship, and a deeply intimate one.

The other moment I take from the gospel is where Jesus placed a small child 'in their midst', as it says. He suspended his teaching for a moment to do this. He was preaching about the realm of God, or as we used to say more often, the kingdom of heaven, and how to get there. And he took this child, and said, 'if you want to enter the kingdom of heaven, you would do well to be like this little one.' Now I know that he wasn't talking about childishness. God help us, we use every bit of energy in our old age to ward off second childhood! So he was talking about being childlike.

Over these years since I turned 80, I have tried to make a very special study of children. Many of you have a huge advantage over me, because I imagine most of you are parents, so you'll have a very immediate knowledge of children's qualities. But I've tried to take this seriously; I actually go down to our local mall, and just watch children, to see what Jesus was looking for when he said that.

And amongst other things, what always strikes me most is that children seem to be absolutely carefree. They have no regrets; they've completely forgotten that they were playing up with their mother or father ten minutes ago. They're just right there, living in the moment. It also seems to me that they fully embrace the world they are in. They're almost shouting at me, 'This is my world, and I own it, I claim it!' And they live with such spontaneity and naturalness.

I feel that they can do all the things I see them doing, pushing boundaries and testing their parents, with such freedom, because they know that they are loved. They are certain of the love of that other person. They know that they'll be accepted, no matter what they do, that the arms will

always be wide open for them. In the very centre of their beings, they know that they are loved. So I say to myself, 'Well, I know that I am loved, too. I have a parent, a father-mother God. And if this is what it's about - total acceptance - there are no regrets.'

In old age, you have lots of time. It's one of the perks; but it's also one of the pitfalls. Because with that time, you can spend a lot of useless energy going over your past, regretting things you did, things you said. But if I'm going to be like that child, I'm not going to do that. I'm going to put those cares away. You have to work at this, I've discovered. This does not come all that easily. I have to deal with my anxiety about the future, as death and the frailty preceding it become more imminent. If I'm going to be like the little child that Jesus said I must be like, I will live in the present, in the now.

That's what I strive to do - to live as fully as I can in the present. I notice that with children, there is a complete absence of any kind of earnestness. I think that one of the big obstacles to the spiritual life is earnestness. I see people, as they get older, becoming more anxious, perhaps. They start saying more prayers, they start moralising about the world, especially about the younger generation - as though the world, in their day, was any one wit better than it is today! We create that myth for ourselves. I think that children don't know the meaning of earnestness.

The other thing that I try to do in this movement towards being childlike in my spiritual life is to embrace the world that I live in the way they do. I look at them and I say, 'Right, it's your world, but it's mine, too. I'm going to embrace it as fully and as spontaneously as you do.' It's very easy to embrace the beauty of the world we live in, but it also includes the excitement and awesomeness of technology, which seems to take a quantum leap every week, as a new invention bursts on the scene.

I don't know what Ipods look like, but I think they sound fabulous. And goodness knows what can't be done with the cell phone, over and above texting and twittering! Parents tell me that they can speak to their son in London, their daughter in Beijing, and see them on their computer, and their children can see them in return. What that must do for the beautiful relationship between parents and children!

Just yesterday, when I was coming up in the plane from Christchurch, I sat next to a woman who told me she was coming to Auckland for a check-up with her surgeon, after a cornea transplant in both eyes. She told me that she was blind, and now she can see. And I just watched her reading for most of the trip. If I'm living in an era that has the resources to make the blind see, I want to embrace it with all my heart.

So my spiritual life is centred on becoming as childlike as I possibly can, in answer to that direction of Jesus. There's a paradox in old people learning to become childlike, but it's the wisdom that lies at the heart of Jesus' teaching. I read a quote quite recently from Pablo Picasso, in which he said 'it takes a long time to grow young.' I think I know what he was talking about.