

# Elderhood:

## Ageing Fears, Ageless Spirit

### Preamble—The Mirror Moment

Somewhere between adulthood and Elderhood there's a realisation, usually totally unwanted, that the body is ageing and in fact, is well on its way. This is the turning point, a moment of truth. There's often some amazement associated with it because it can be the first time we've ever really considered that we might be getting old. Now.

For me this occurred over ten years ago when I was in my sixties. I was weeding the veggie patch on our cattle farm, unceremoniously down on hands and knees and happy until I decided to stand up. Killer pain shot into my lower back. I couldn't move. Finally, the only way to get up was by using the garden shovel standing upright to pull myself up which seemed unbelievable as I'd always had vitality and flexibility. I thought to myself, "Jeysis", as the Irish say, "Jeysis, I must be getting old!"

That was my Mirror Moment.

It's different for everyone, like seeing an old person reflected in a shop window, then realising—wait, that's me! Or a young woman giving up her seat to you on a train, which makes you wonder how old you actually look. More seriously, body parts can start to wear out. Nearly all the people I knew back then who were around my age, didn't want to be that old, complained about being that old, and tried to hide the fact that they were that old. Worse, many told put-down jokes about themselves ageing.

After several days, defiance had come to my defence. I decided, "Alright, I am ageing, and I'll do it in style."

Back then, Elderhood wasn't even acknowledged as a word and it was audacious to talk about it as my own life-stage, even though I explained it was different to old age that came much later toward the end of life. Almost everyone said, "What a depressing term, Elderhood," and I wondered why that should be as it's not the case in all cultures. After several years thinking and researching, I wrote a book on Elderhood (yet unpublished), had a regular talking spot on regional radio, many speaking engagements including Science and Nonduality Italy, New Dimensions Radio USA, Chip Conley and Modern Elder Academy California—and wrote a lot of articles including this one, *Elderhood: Ageing Fears, Ageless Spirit*. I wanted everyone to start feeling good about growing older and not lose spirit, accepting the losses, facing the fears, and appreciating the gains and added perspective that the third life-stage offers.

We can fight off becoming an elder or choose to grow into it and own it. One of the joys is making social change from the inside out, whether that is small or big we can never underestimate the way it touches and leads the way for others.

What follows was written in 2016 when no one was around to help with the biggest transition of my life and for my clients and friends who were at the same place too.

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# Elderhood: Ageing Fears, Ageless Spirit

By D. E. Percy

Sooner or later we all face Elderhood, life's third age and Australia's fastest growing demographic according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Arguably our most significant life transition, it is largely ignored, and we have faced it alone. Until now.

The psychological impact of moving from mid-life to Elderhood tends to surface existential fears. Although experienced alone, these fears are remarkably similar for everyone. But not everyone discovers the antidote . . .

The High Country, early summer. Two men in their late sixties are fishing. Stranger's, they arrive at their favorite river spot at the same time. By late afternoon – after a day of staccato analysis of fishing holes and flies – they talk. One-liners. Both are divorced, now live rough, drive old model cars.

One decides to bite the bullet. “How'd you end up like this?”

The other looks him in the eye. “Went broke. What about you?”

“Yeah, lost my money. Lost my business.”

Financial loss is one of the five great fears of Australians in their third life-stage. Elderhood is not a strict chronological age group but more a state of mind, starting as young as fifty-five years old to around eighty-five when we enter the final life-stage of old age.

It was only when I realised that my own disillusionment and world-weariness was a thwarted need for a new way of life with new purpose, that I realized I was in transition. Psychologically I

had already moved on from adulthood. Although I didn't know what would be next, I investigated and recorded my long personal transition to elderhood.

During those transitional five years, I had countless deep conversations about elderhood with Australian elders from all walks of life (most names are changed to protect their identity). Six themes emerged. Five themes are about the fears we face with elderhood. The sixth theme is the antidote to those fears.

Coming face to face with our own ageing is confronting. Non-acceptance of elderhood is not always about vanity or wanting to stay youthful. It is coming face to face with our existential fears about life and death that have been around since before the birth of speech. Moving into elderhood brings these phantoms out of the shadows where they have lurked throughout our adult years.

### **Financial Loss**

We all know people concerned about money, some with good reason, others simply obsessed with it. Some have a scarcity mindset, quite incongruent with their bank balance. Wealthy and average earners alike can fear losing their dollars.

Sandra lives alone in a growing Victorian country town. Nearly seventy, she loves classical music, from Chopin to Wagner, and has a weekly music gig on local community radio. She takes her radio program seriously spending hours in preparation. The audience loves her because of her open conversation and wit. And Sandra loves this voluntary work.

Earlier in life, Sandra was a well-paid manager. She missed out on having her own kids and ended up in debt after the death of her husband. Driven by a fear of poverty, Sandra worked flat-out until retirement, living frugally and saving as much as she could. Now she is financially comfortable--no mortgage, no debt, living modestly.

To meet her you would think she doesn't have a care in the world. But Sandra still holds that dark, quiet fear. What if she must pay out a large sum of money – say because of illness so she

can't earn? Her foundations would be eaten away. She would have to sell her house ... her security.

Visions of scarcity and misery follow. Sandra keeps it to herself, as though talking about it could make it real.

She is not alone. Peter and his wife live well, supporting their adult kids with young families. He owns property, still runs his engineering company, and has a share portfolio. He enjoys both assets and cash flow, and they live between town and country homes. But Peter's looming fear is financial loss, a fear that increasingly takes its toll on his physical health.

For Australians as in other developed countries, money has assumed a deeper meaning beyond mere currency and what it can buy. It has become symbolic, representing security, safety and survival.

These are the physiological and consciousness base-levels of human existence, outlined in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and later the work of developmental psychologist, Clare Graves, philosopher Ken Wilbur and others. Without this base, the next levels of human consciousness can't be reached – from belonging, self-esteem and love to self-realisation and beyond. There is a problem here, however. We can mistake the symbol (money) for the actuality (our psychological wellbeing). But this is not a matter of cause and effect.

Wellbeing exists in situations of modest money. Living a simple life can be an active choice. Having less money takes adaptation and a degree of ingenuity and willingness. These are qualities the Australian war-born and Boomer generation have in spades. They are renowned for inventiveness and flair in finding a way to do and fix things: a way to live. Why?

Could it be to do with our huge, remote country? When you're stuck in the outback with a broken-down vehicle hundreds of k's from anywhere, you must find a way to get it going again. Convict free-settlers and migrant families all had to make something from whatever was at

hand, with unfamiliar materials and surroundings. Of course, it all becomes a different matter when finding a way is taken out of our hands. Then we are dealing with a lack of control.

### **Fear of Illness**

Illness seems to be feared because of the loss of control and independence, as much as for the sickness itself. Gavin, an engineer in his late seventies, works from home on a family business with his wife, Wendy. They live in an inner Melbourne suburb with their youngest son who developed bipolar disorder in his twenties.

Although Gavin is healthy, during our conversations he brought up illness and incapacity as his biggest fear. “Wendy and I have an understanding. If I become terminally ill or incapacitated through a stroke or something, I’m to be allowed to die – assisted to die even. My worst nightmare is to be left hanging on with my mind still working but the body frail and dependent on others for the basic functions.”

I asked each of the elders about their attitude to death and dying. Nearly all said they no longer held a fear of death and that they’d come to terms with their own mortality. Instead, illness and incapacity were cause for ongoing anxieties.

Various remedies were mentioned and more than once I heard, “Just give me a good bottle of scotch and send me off into the bush with some sleeping pills.” Anything to avoid prolonged sickness.

### **Losing Your Mind**

“My dad had Alzheimer’s. It was the most soul-destroying experience – a slow deterioration. He’d been such a capable and funny person. So lovable. Then he didn’t know me! It’s such a terrible thing. If I ever get it, I want my kids to shoot me rather than put them through that!” Most elders talked about a fear of losing their mind . . . bar seven, who had a light-hearted view.

Chris, a doting grandfather and people person from way back, offered his good-humored wisdom, “Both my parents ended up with Alzheimer’s so I guess my chances aren’t too hot. Personally, I have trouble with my memory now but I figure it’s not bad for over eighty years

old. My brain's OK, but I can't remember even short sentences. It doesn't worry me too much. I find ways around it. I've always been good at systems and making lists, so that's what I do every day.

“If I lose my marbles, I reckon it's my family that will have to cope (he laughs heartily). I won't know what's happening and I'll keep on having a good time. They're a resilient bunch. And I'm lucky I've got a big family. They'll all work it out between them.”

Patricia told a story about attending an elite cocktail function when she was chief executive.

“The wife of one of the dignitaries was popping into different groups of people, champagne in hand, gaily saying that she was Pam and had Alzheimer's you know, and couldn't remember a thing. Her husband was beside himself with embarrassment because it was true.”

Then there's country life. Small town locals all look after Harry, who lives alone in his caravan; walking distance to town. Dave the publican says, “Harry's lived here all his life. He can't really look after himself now. Doesn't remember anything. Gets lost on his way to town. We give him his tea (meal) every day at five. We watch out for him. I hope I have it that good when I'm older.”

### **Loss of Meaning**

One of the main ways human beings differ to other living creatures is we create meaning. When meaning fades and life seems purposeless, depression and angst easily slip in.

Culturally, indigenous Australians take the lead with the preparation, transition, mentoring and initiation of carefully chosen elders. Their understanding and practices of elderhood are developmentally advanced. A long investment of personal evolution, deepening spiritual values and community involvement is demonstrated and required of those newly called. It's a role to be valued, respected, and aspired to.

Generally, once we move on from adult work-life, apart from the logistics of finances and health, the available choices center on activities, travel, starting a business or voluntary work. The focus on doing or having, however, misses the need for *being*. The result is a hunger for meaning.

Mary retired from teaching eight years ago, spending the last few years in the school as the school Principal. The role turned out to be more demanding than Mary ever anticipated, compounded by a new board of directors throwing their weight around and making life stressful, claiming all her time and attention. Mary was looking forward to retiring, having planned a move to live in the country with her husband.

On retirement, a good friend told Mary it would take her five years to recover herself and find her purpose. Mary didn't believe it. "Six months or a year, max!" was her prediction. But, her friend was right.

"This has been a long, excruciating journey. My husband, Joe, has been busy with his business and doesn't need my help. For the first time in my life, I felt that there's no meaning in my own life. I'd never thought much about meaning before. Then I couldn't stop thinking about it.

"It's been like a loss of my identity. Quite frightening. I had no idea so much of me was tied up with my work. Suddenly I was no one, lost, with no tribe to relate to anymore. I had to start again, but where? How? Doing what?"

Max found much the same. He worked as a carpenter, "You do the same sort of thing every day for forty-five years, get up at the same time, go to work, meet your subbies. Then there comes a day you have to stop. As a tradie you mightn't get a choice because your back goes, or your arms get wrecked.

"Everything stops. There's no one to go and meet. Nothing to get up for. Everything stops dead. It's scary . . . Most tradies my age are computer illiterate. I went to computer class – the sort that teaches you how to turn it on – and I still couldn't get it when I was home on my own. Everything's on the internet now. We get left behind.



“I’ve got my house – it’s not much but it’s all I need. But there’s got to be more to life.”

Beyond the drive for acquisitive having and doing things, the need for meaning unfolds, coupled with a fear of not really living life, not knowing life’s personal purpose, and not living it.

Softly in the background are unwanted whisperings about life being finite. Honing in on what matters starts to become insistent. More than at any other time in life we seek meaning as elders.

Where do we find meaning?

Psychiatrist Victor Frankl spent years as a prisoner in Auschwitz. Under the most extreme and desperate circumstances he watched some prisoners survive while others perished. What made the difference, he concluded, was their capacity for creating meaning. Even in Auschwitz. The prisoners who were able to generate meaning, like a determination to be reunited with their loved ones, were the ones that made it through.

### **Fear of Loneliness**

Loneliness and being alone are two different things. We can be alone and in solitude, and not feel lonely. Conversely, loneliness can be experienced in a relationship.

“In my case I’m on my own after my wife died, so there’s no one to talk to”, says Phillip. “I turn on the radio and TV so there’s plenty of noise. Helps keep the heebie-jeebies away. But for the married guys – their wife doesn’t want them around all day, she’s been without them round for forty years or so. So, what do they do? There’s only so much golf or fishing you can do. Tasks keep you busy, but it’s not the same as companionship. There’s a world of difference.”

Loneliness is not something we can find someone to fix for us. Not a therapist, not a lover, nor a close friend. The responsibility is ours.

Frances gets up early and goes to the gym most days. “Got to keep fit. Helps the memory.” She has lived alone since her husband died. “I’ve got no time for people who complain about being lonely. You’ve got to get out there and do things. I have friends who stay in bed until after eleven every day! Then they mope around until someone contacts them. I mean, no wonder they’re depressed and lonely. I say anyone who’s lonely only has themselves to blame. There’s a whole world of people out there.” Frances is seventy-eight and rarely eats dinner alone.

Pat lives alone but is not lonely. “I have good friends. I have some nights alone, always with a glass of wine. I don’t buy that idea of never drinking on your own. If that were the case, some people I know would never even get a glass of wine!”

Some people talked about a fear of *future* loneliness. Because of a seriously ill partner or their kids planning to move away, they realize sooner or later they will end up living alone, without family or friends around.

The etymology of the word ‘alone’ is *all one*. Being in solitude, for short or extended periods, is an opportunity to recharge and integrate, to become all one.

### **The Antidote**

The last theme that arose from my conversations was the antidote to the five fears. Unless fear is in response to actual threat and potential harm where flight or fight is necessary, the mental and physical effort that goes into fear can consume us. Fear can paralyze thinking and movement, give rise to obsessive thoughts and behaviour, and in general make life a misery. Fear is more likely to hinder than assist dealing with life issues.

The elders doing well and enjoying life all shared the same thing: an attitude as well as a commitment to action and their community. Again, we can learn from our indigenous friends. What they do is beautiful in its simplicity. *Give back*. That is the antidote that keeps away the dark side.

After selling his farm, Kevin was at a loose end. He made a few trips up north with a mate on various errands during the first few years, but that was not enough. A neighboring farmer was in trouble. He had run out of money and needed new fencing. Kevin heard about it and decided to give him a hand. “Well, he was a young bloke just starting out with a family. I couldn’t just sit back and do nothing while we watched him go bust.”

That job ended up taking months. Nearly all fences needed replacing. Kevin got a few mates in to help from time to time. He didn’t know it then, but that was the start of his elderhood vocation. A self-taught mechanic, welder and builder, Kevin has been busy over the years ever since, assisting farmers in need with everything from building machinery sheds to getting an old tractor running.

On a practical level, giving back started to fulfill long-term needs for the elders as well as for others. Philanthropic work, for instance, produced structure, belonging and purpose for the givers – all essential foundations they were missing. As elders we can contribute to the community. The community may be family, neighbors, our profession, or the global village. Young people especially need us.

Giving back engages our spirit of generosity. It centers attention on what is going on for others and what we have to offer. It’s a win-win and feel-good situation. This alone lifts the spirit. Our spirit as elders shines through.

“We have long life experience. We have tasted bitter disappointment, experienced great joys, been exposed by failures, managed our losses and betrayals, and scraped together grace, hope, and from time to time, been worthy of true dignity.

Elders know about living. We can give back in spades.”

Excerpt from *Elders: practicing the wisdom arts*, D. E. Percy, 2016

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