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By Tim Bowden

GROWING OLD DISGRACEFULLY – A BETTER WAY TO GO?

Ten years on from the United Nations International Year of Older Persons it seems appropriate to consider whether much has changed at all in the way that senior citizens, older persons or whatever the latest politically correct nomenclature has decreed, are accepted and included in our society.

In 1999 the definition of the age of an older person was difficult to nail down. While the UN's own bureaucracy and that of other NGOs seemed comfortable with 65, the Australian Coalition, charged with our contribution to the IYOP (don't we love those acronyms) was surprised to learn that many Australian employers regarded 40 as their staff's use-by-date.

I think it is safe to regard myself as old, ten days into my 73<sup>rd</sup> year. Certainly the young man with whom I remonstrated recently who was driving his car the wrong way down a one-way street was in no doubt. 'Why don't you fruit off you stupid old bastard' he said among other uncomplimentary personally directed remarks. Having established that he wasn't actually going to hit me, I said: Listen son, you'll be old too one day. All you have to do it wait.' This probably went through to the keeper, because testosterone-fuelled young men can never conceive that they will ever have to book into an aged care home. Or be booked in if dementia, that scourge of later life, has snuck through the back door.

I only recently adjusted the mental picture that other people might have of me walking down the street from 37 to 47 – and that was only after a young woman stood up to offer me her seat in a crowded bus. I wondered whom she was doing this for, and realised it was me. I took it too.

Yet some people can't wait to be old. I knew several people in their late 40s who were counting down the days until they could join Over Fifties Clubs.

In the 1999 United Nations principles for Older Persons, Sections 14 and 17 specifically mentioned the importance of dignity – to live in dignity and to be able to make decisions in the quality of their lives particularly when living in any kind of care, and also to be free of any exploitation, physical or mental abuse.

My father John Bowden, died in Tasmania the year before these principles were enunciated by the UN, but he would have agreed with them wholeheartedly – particularly Section 6: Older persons should be able to reside at home for as long as possible.

At 92 Father woke up dead in his own bed, in his own home, thereby bypassing the entire aged care system. It wasn't a bad effort. My mother Peg, to whom he was devoted and nursed through the agonies of acute rheumatoid arthritis, had died sixteen years earlier. A pensioner, he had then lived alone, happily, helping to sustain himself with produce grown in his own garden, spending the summer making highly vegetable soups which he froze and stored in his freezer to last him through the winter – like an old squirrel. In his memoir, *The Way My Father Tells It*, which he dictated into a tape recorder later midwived by me into publication, he ended the first edition with this sentence: 'I live on in my house and I hope I can continue to live in my house until such time as they lead me or carry me away.'

Eight years later he was still there, and contributed to a later edition with an extra chapter we titled 'On Turning Ninety'. I have to say he wasn't too happy about that milestone, although he cheered up when all the family arrived to celebrate it. He just felt that the future, in his nineties, was likely to be more fraught than his eighties, and that he was facing failing health and worse, being unable to look after himself.

He had no wish to get a telegram from the Queen, and had he been thoughtful enough to leave his telephone number enabling me to talk to him wherever he went, he would have expressed his utter satisfaction with how things turned out. We shouldn't have been surprised that he tried to join us at his wake. In the midst of much valedictory celebration my brother Nick answered the door to find the undertaker there with his ashes. John G Bowden always liked a good party.

But to return to the concept of dignity, I recall even when I still lived at home in the 1960s, my father hated the clichés perpetrated by our local paper, the *Hobart Mercury* to mark regular seasonal events. Every winter, when the first snow fell on Mt Wellington, *The Mercury* would unfailingly publish pictures of screaming nurses throwing snowballs at each other. He was even more irritated by the inevitable Christmas photographs of older persons in, say a Salvation Army Home, seated at their Christmas lunch sporting ludicrous party hats with Santa pom poms, fake snow and streamers in the background, looking lost and lugubrious as well they might. This used to cause my normally good-natured parent to expostulate mightily. It was the utter lack of dignity accorded to these old, clearly bewildered people that appalled him. I suspect that *The Mercury*, which I eventually worked for as a reporter, still does it.

What is it that causes so many, doubtless well meaning people, to adopt a tone of voice when talking to older people that they might use to young children with learning difficulties or adults a few sandwiches short of a picnic.

'And how are we today'? (In a condescending voice.)

I feel I should reply:

'We are quite well thankyou, and still in full possession of our faculties, most of us anyway, and in any case we'd rather be spoken to as though we were not feeble minded.'

Being an older chap I find I am often spoken to in this tone of voice in shops or government agencies – not banks curiously enough.

Let's face it, children begin life in a very dependant way, incontinent, toothless, absorbing nourishment in the form of liquids and soft pap spooned into drooling mouths. At the end of a long life this wheel may turn the full circle, although none of us want to go there. But it may well be that even in or close to such extremis, individuals may still have a sharpish mind, and a sense of humour, sometimes even a bawdy one – and I mean women as well as men – and would appreciate NOT being treated like the infants we once undoubtedly were. I'm not saying all professional carers talk down to the old and frail, but some do. Dignity is hard to maintain in those circumstances, which is why Father – who had visited friends in care – didn't want to go there.

I must be careful to pay tribute to all those caring and conscientious workers in most of our aged care facilities. Horror stories of neglected or abused dementia patients in poorly run nursing homes will always make the headlines. Another good week or month in a properly managed facility is hardly likely to feature in the tabloid press. I am reminded of the radical journalist Claude Cockburn who worked for a time as a sub-editor on the London Times. He is famous for many things, but treasured for his wonderful headline in the Times: SMALL EARTHQUAKE IN PERU, NOT MANY HURT.

A similar headline, NURSING HOME REVIEW – PATIENTS GENERALLY HAPPY is unlikely to feature on Page 3 of the Sydney Daily Telegraph.

While my father died in his own bed at 91, my father-in-law Eric exited in a Sydney nursing home – in some style I should say. After the death of his wife Margaret, he had made the transition from hostel accommodation to nursing home when he became too frail to look after himself. Visiting him was a pleasure. The staff were cheerful and competent and he seemed very happy there. Eric also lived into his nineties, and towards the end his main measure of happiness were to have a large box of man-sized tissues beside his bed next to a bottle of fruit jubes. He was always a courtly, considerate and polite man and the staff were fond of him.

Shortly before his wife Margaret died several years earlier, my wife Ros asked them both whether they had any requests for their funeral arrangements. Eric looked startled. 'What! Am I going to die?' Without actually quoting the WC Fields line on the inevitability of death and taxes, she gently assured him that he would.

When, at 92, it became obvious that Eric was failing, Ros was concerned that he seemed agitated and was possibly fighting against death. She wanted to reassure him that it was OK to let go, and OK to die. Religion had been important in his life, and she arranged for an Anglican clergyman to visit him. Before that actually happened, Ros arrived at his bedside for a visit to find an aroma therapist gently massaging his temples with soothing and fragrant oils. Eric chose this moment to slip away, which was nicely timed in one way, but a bit of a shock for the young woman working on him for whom this was a career first.

Reverting again to the beginning of the life cycle, babies have a fairly traumatic entrance to this world from the comfort and security of the womb, although the growth in caesarean sections these days gives the baby and mother a more peaceful option.

Most do not manage to leave this life as peacefully as Eric, or my father John despite advances made in palliative care. I think that the passing of euthanasia legislation 'Rights of the Terminally Ill' in the Northern Territory and its subsequent overturning by the Commonwealth Government following Kevin Andrew's private members bill has made it harder for people to die with dignity. Opinion polls consistently show that three out of four Australians believe they should have the right to end their lives particularly if they are in severe pain from a terminal illness.

I believe that before the controversy it may well have been easier for doctors to assist terminally ill people to die as perhaps they did, before the harsh Kleig-like glare of the NT Government legislation and Kevin Andrew's Federal repeal legislation shone starkly throughout the health and gerontology industry. Fearful of Right to Lifers lurking in corridors, it is a brave doctor who will now bend the rules to release a terminally ill patient from their pain and suffering.

I'm sure you are in no doubt as to how I feel about this matter, and I am not a fan of the professedly deeply Christian Mr Andrew.

Let me give a very personal example, and these events took place fortunately long before Kevin Andrew's less than compassionate private members bill in 2008. My mother Peg died at the age of 70. Formerly a healthy, active tennis playing woman until her early fifties, she had a mismatched blood transfusion after haemorrhaging during a minor surgical procedure, and from that time developed chronic rheumatoid arthritis, which as you know, at its worst, attacks the body's own immune systems and every moving joint in the body, causing acute pain. When she did die, my father asked her doctors what had actually killed her – was it rheumatoid arthritis? 'No John', said her long-time physician, 'not arthritis but its "cures".' In other words the cortisone and other powerful drugs that she took over the years.

A woman of great outgoing spirit, she seldom talked about herself. The toll on her body was shocking. I spent Easter with her a week or so before she died, and her skin was wrinkled like tissue paper and she was permanently covered in bruises because of her condition. Barely able to walk, she always said that she would fight on as long as she could be at home with my father looking after her. Only days after we returned to Sydney she collapsed with septicaemia. Rushed to hospital by ambulance, a cheerful nurse said as she was carried in: 'I'm sure everything will be fine Mrs Bowden. We'll soon have you up and into the hot baths at the rehab centre.'

My father remembers a claw like hand reaching out urgently from the trolley to grab his arm, as she uttered the last words they ever spoke together.

'Don't let them.'

It was fairly evident to everyone that she was dying. My father made it clear to the doctor treating her, that it was not the family's wish that her suffering be prolonged with unnecessary intervention. My sister, a nurse, happened to work in the same hospital. That wonderful doctor checked with her about what my father had said, and she confirmed his and the family's views.

Very shortly after that, my mother died. I have no way of knowing what actually happened, but we all remain grateful to those responsible for her care that whatever was done, had an immediate and merciful result.

At the time Peg died I was working on a major oral history project on Australian prisoners-of-war of the Japanese for the ABC. Against the Geneva Convention (which the Japanese hadn't signed anyway) the POWs were turned into slave labourers for war-related projects. One of the worst was the building of the infamous Thai-Burma Railway. Starved, and suffering from treatable tropical diseases like beri beri, dysentery, pellagra, and at times cholera, the emaciated Australians were forced out to work each day by their captors, sometimes ludicrously carried to the rail embankments on stretchers to keep the numbers of workers on the job promised to faraway Tokyo.

About one in three Australians working on the railway died. Cholera could kill you within hours. Will power was not an issue here. But in talking with the survivors, I heard again and again about certain diggers who told their friends they had had enough and literally lost the will to live, turned their faces to the bamboo wall of their so called hospitals in the jungle, and died within a few hours – often during the pleading of their mates to hang on.

A strong element described by those who did make it was a mixed bag of an utter determination to get home, also sustained by hatred of their captors and a bloody-minded resolution not to be beaten by their circumstances. I was told by survivors that the men who said, 'I don't think I'm going to make it home', often didn't.

After the programs were broadcast, I received a call from a nurse at the Heidelberg Repat Hospital in Melbourne who made a very interesting point. She said that of all her terminally ill patients, the ex-POWs from Asia were the ones that died the hardest. They had survived through fighting death as POWs, and they simply couldn't bring themselves to let go in the final weeks of their lives when it would have been entirely appropriate to do so. This was one survival battle they could not win.

My point is that my wife's counsel to her father that it was OK to let go, it was time to stop fighting and die, can be appropriate advice at such times.

I'm going to get off death in a moment, but we all have to go there don't we.

Next the cautionary tale of Ros's Aunt Nora, one feisty lady. Born the daughter of a very conservative judge, she became a Communist when the Menzies Coalition government tried to ban the Communist Party. She used to wheel baby Ros around the streets of Sydney's ultra conservative suburb Killara, stuffing letterboxes with Communist propaganda concealed under the mattress of Ros's pram. Always a loner, she had strong views about how she wanted to die. Not only did she become a member of the Euthanasia Society, she also signed and had witnessed an Enduring Guardianship, spelling out that she did not want her life prolonged in the event of illness, old age or anything else. And she was particularly irritated to reach the age of 80, by which stage she hoped she would be gone.

The only thing that no-one foresaw, and we didn't notice because she lived alone and these things happen slowly, is that she went potty.

Nora had to go into care, and she wasn't a model resident. Being a loner, she didn't want to eat in the communal dining room, and the hostel obligingly took her meals to her room for some months until she was coaxed down to eat with fellow residents – to whom she didn't talk but went straight back to her first floor room after eating. One day while Nora was at lunch, another resident took a bathroom stool to Nora's room and jumped off her balcony on to the concrete path below with fatal results. Nora, who once graduated as a lawyer but never practised, was incautious enough in her now addled mind to tell the hostel staff that this seemed a very good idea. A close watch had to be kept on her as a result.

The one thing that Nora did fixate on, and didn't forget, was dying. 'Why am I still here'? She would ask Ros. Eventually she refused to eat, and was moved to a

psychiatric hospital. From Nora's point of view, that was the worst ever move. The one thing a psych hospital won't let you do is die in it. Forget enduring guardianship documents, they don't count there. If a patient DOES die, there has to be a mandatory inquest, and that is why carking there is positively discouraged. Fortunately Ros managed to get her moved into a nursing home where they weren't too fussed about Nora not eating once her wishes had been explained to them, and kept her comfortable while she determinedly starved herself to death.

As a woman in the hospital bed next to Ros's ailing mother Margaret said: 'It's hard enough coming into this world, it's even harder leaving it.'

Reviewing what I had written so far, I was concerned that I had perhaps overemphasised my personal belief that it often was too hard to die, and that the system was, if anything, perhaps too focussed on keeping people alive past the point where their lives had any meaning. I emailed my speech to a friend, whose 94-year-old mother is presently in a nursing home, with advanced dementia, not even recognising her own daughter.

She replied, saying:

In my view, the issue of going gracefully has been sidelined for 'overly diligent care'. No one seems to look at the body in the bed and say – does he or she want to keep going? I can't think of anything to add, Tim, except that it is gruelling stuff for those left behind, trying to remember them as they were, not as a shrivelled frightened little animal like my Mum, who stares wide eyed at me over the blankets with no comprehension of what is going on.

The other thing that should be said, of course, is that when elderly people do make it clear that they would rather keep on living, that they should be allowed to do so with all the dedication and care that is so often provided in your industry.

Well having knocked off both sets of parents, and Aunt Nora that's probably enough of death for the moment. Perhaps a better option is to grow old disgracefully. I'm sure you haven't yet despaired yet of me ever getting to the nitty gritty of my advertised address.

One of Ros's favourite poems is titled *When...*, by Jenny Joseph. Here is how it begins:

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple  
 With a red hat which doesn't go, and  
 Doesn't suit me  
 And I shall spend my pension on brandy and  
 summer gloves and satin sandals, and say  
 we've no money for butter  
 I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired  
 And gobble up samples in shops and  
 press alarm bells  
 And run my stick along the public railings  
 And make up for the sobriety of my youth.  
 I shall go out in my slippers in the rain  
 And pick the flowers in other people's gardens  
 And learn to spit.

And there's more. Ros is three years younger than me, and so far I have not noticed any extreme manifestations of her beloved poem, except she is wearing more purple... And now I come to think of it, she is pretty shameless about pinching cuttings from other people's gardens.

I can't point my finger at a similar poem for blokes, but I think I'm getting stroprier since I exceeded my biblical span of three score years and ten. One of the symptoms is to write diatribes on the internet about my pet hates. The ABC has an on-line site called *Unleashed*, which gives me a forum and then people write in to agree or disagree. They even pay a modest fee for the accepted essays.

Recent raves have been about the excessive violence in what I call thugby and footbrawl, and the careless use of language, like qualifying the word unique – you know, almost unique, very unique, absolutely unique. It is none of these things, it is just unique! Also repeated phrases which become meaningless, like 'At the end of the day' – politicians are deeply addicted to this one. I mean at the end of WHAT day? This week this year? Aunt Nora, now I come to think of it, was particularly scornful of the mispronunciation of ceremony as CereMOANy. It keeps me off the streets and adds a bottle or two to the wine cellar.

The extraordinary pleasures of becoming a grandparent – three little persons now – has added much to our lives. They are all small, but perfectly formed, and the most engaging and intelligent kids ever created. And we can give them back at the end of the day. (I said that deliberately.)

I'd let my father take up the narrative on achieving a great age at this point from the final chapter in his memoir, *On Being Ninety*.

The fact of reaching ninety triggers a certain amount of reflection on the ageing process. There are deprivations---but this is no complaint. I am well aware that there are those who are much younger than I and who suffer from painful health problems like arthritis or heart trouble, and I realise how lucky I am. The deprivations I feel are more like irritations by comparison. Lack of energy is something I feel considerably. Once I could get stuck into a job and finish it if I wanted to---like mowing the lawns. Now I can't do them at all. Short term memory is another difficulty. You never know what the date is, and when you go and look at the calendar you have forgotten by the time you get back to put in on the letter you are writing. There is also a big drop in your capacity to understand. Sometimes you have to read a paragraph in the paper three times before you get the sense of it. At least deterioration in hearing and sight can be coped with by the sciences, thanks to hearing aids and glasses.

One of the inevitable consequences of living so long is the loss of your contemporaries. The impact of your friends and acquaintances dying is not as great in old age as it was when you were younger. Even the idea of one's own death is sort of muffled---you don't regard it as anything important. I am quite honest when I say this. There are things one would miss, like the people one loves, but there is a cushioning effect when even close friends die, because I am convinced that there is nothing tragic in the death of anybody over eighty. It's sad, of course, for people who love them, but it's not a tragedy.

I'm happier talking about the pluses of old age. I think my tolerance of other people's behaviour has increased. And there are an awful lot of things I used to think mattered, that don't matter at all. The capacity to mind your own business is a great comfort.

I never think of myself as old and it's always rather a surprise to me when the supermarket checkout girl says, 'Now can you manage that, would you like someone to carry your bags out to the car for you?' And the answer is often, 'Yes'. If you are on a bus and get into conversation with strangers, they seem mildly surprised that you are interested in what they have to say. Young men seem to talk more openly and not to be on guard as they might be with a younger male. It's like the old eunuch in the harem, I suppose. But you can have had some very good conversations with young people once they find out you are a good listener and not a bore.

You can never be sure what children are going to say. My eldest grand daughter Anna is now twenty-one. When she was about three we were having a holiday at the family weekender Askelon on the east coast of Tasmania. I was drying myself after a shower and the bathroom door opened and in slid this little girl. I went on drying myself as a good grandfather should. Anna stood there for a while, and said, 'John, you've

got a penis'. I said, 'Yes Anna, I do indeed have a penis'. She went on. 'Daddy has a penis, and baby Tim-Jim has got a penis too'. The matter rested there for a moment and I suppose I asked for it a bit by saying, 'Anna have you got a penis'?

'No', said Anna, 'I haven't got a penis'.

'Well what have you got, Anna?' There was a short silence while she considered this.

'I've got a bit of a cold.'

Before he kept that final and inevitable appointment, John Bowden used to turn first to the obituary columns in the Hobart Mercury even before he read the weather forecast. Now this was in itself remarkable because Tasmanians are obsessively interested in their weather because they have so much of it. Anyway you tend to run out of contemporaries when you become a nonagenarian, and Father liked to see whose gnarled old feet had loosened their grip on the twig before his did.

Eventually you live long enough to realise that most obituaries, particularly of well-known people, are riddled with cant and hypocrisy. You really need a glossary of terms to bring reality back into the insipid panegyrics so often inflicted on the unsuspecting public. Fellow professionals, for instance, reading about the death of an eminent medico described as 'a grand practitioner of the old school', would know full well that he should have retired years before he did, and was known without affection in the trade as 'that bloody old butcher'.

Let's consider a few more of these euphemisms. For 'gregarious and sports loving' read, 'legendary drunk'. 'Loving husband and father to'... 'a compulsive womaniser'. 'Selfless and lifelong contribution to business' should have been, 'a dreadful old crook who couldn't lie straight in bed – or his coffin'. And that 'self-made man who never lost the common touch' should have been described as 'a ruthless and vulgar opportunist who ate off his knife'.

But the pendulum is swinging towards refreshing candour in obituaries – in England at any rate. A friend sent me the obituary of one Simon Raven – headlined 'Promiscuous chronicler of upper-class life' – from the Guardian, circa 2001, and he commented: 'You don't see obits like this in Australian papers.' Indeed you don't.

Allow me to share some of Michael Barber's assessment of Mr Raven.

'The death of Simon Raven at the age of 73 after suffering a stroke, is proof that the devil looks after his own. He ought, by rights, to have died at shame at 30 or of drink at 50.

Instead he survived to produce 25 novels, including *Alms for Oblivion*, a 10-volume saga of English upper class life, numerous screenplays, eight volumes of essays and memoirs, including *Shadows On The Grass*, ‘the filthiest book on cricket ever written’ according to E W Swanton...’ and his obituarist Michael Barber was just warming up!

The most positive thing that Barber reveals about his raffish subject is his love of the classics, which Raven apparently read in the original every day. His childhood, though, ‘reads like a Victorian cautionary tale gone wrong. He is the golden youth whose high promise is betrayed by his base appetites, so that one door after another is closed to him’.

Barber goes on: ‘He later claimed to have been “deftly and very agreeably” seduced by the games master at his preparatory school, but acquired his Luciferian reputation as a scholarship boy at Charterhouse school, before he was expelled in 1945 for serial homosexuality. According to his contemporary, Gerald Priestland, he “trailed an odour of brimstone”.’

And on it goes... ‘His considerable earnings went on food, drink, travel, gambling and sex...’ And Barber concludes: ‘Tall slim and beautiful as a youth, Simon soon lost his looks and his figure.

Simon Raven devised this epitaph for himself: “He shared his bottle – and, when still young and appetising, his bed”.’

I am, unashamedly, a journalist by profession, and surely no-one lived more disgracefully than Jeffrey Barnard, bibulous chronicler of his ‘Low Life’ column in the *Spectator*. Not wishing to leave his obituary to some unworthy scribbler, he decided to write his own shortly before he drank himself to death in 1999. In it, he included this description of his early life.

‘His drinking began to escalate to such an extent that he was unable to hold down the most ordinary job and he was consequently advised to take up... journalism.’

Oh dear.

The comedian Spike Milligan famously suggested the epitaph he wanted on his tombstone: ‘I told you I was ill’. There was a row with the church about it, but the compromise was that the epitaph was so inscribed – in Gaelic! Spike would have liked that I think.

Thank you for having me.

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