

Past Values – Something to Sing About

An essay by

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It was saddening to learn from a disconsolate assembly of sixty-something family and friends in Edinburgh last week, about the recent passing of a former school teacher of mine – 101 years of age no less – one who contentedly endured and defiantly persisted as bright as a button - right up to the critical, but most natural moment of his departure from our fractured planet.

Despite surviving into a state of greatly advanced antiquity, the common belief within the neighbourhood of my upbringing, a location where he had long resided, (88 years to be precise) – and until only recently too, (Admitted to a Residential Care Home on the rural outskirts of the Scottish capital city during June last), that an irreplaceable bit of one's [former] community had finally been chipped away.

My mind this afternoon is therefore awash with ineradicable memories of this noteworthy individual, one who unquestionably savoured his prolonged worldly tenancy and hugely fulfilling existence on Mother Earth – and one who doggedly lingered for many decades following retirement - all thanks to a characteristic refusal to let his spirit deteriorate along with his well-aged, corporeal framework.

Long after my scholastic peers and I had departed high school, circa 1965 – and that too of our former mentor's unparalleled and immensely inspiring tutelage, heterogeneous numbers of his former flock, over ensuing years - were frequently invited to take afternoon tea with both he and his late wife, this at their uncomplicated, furnished tenement apartment – one that was positioned conveniently adjacent to my own family domicile, deep in the west of the city – the soft-furnished, portrait bedecked and welcoming chamber in which we were 'entertained' - (feasting-on reservoirs of hot refreshment and toothsome Tiffin) – radiated an alluring, neutral ambience – and one far removed from the once saturnine, if not Spartan surroundings

of educational dissemination that resolutely schooled me – over fifty years ago!

He was one who inexhaustibly maintained an insatiable interest in the evolution of his erstwhile, non-related progeny - be they 'achievers', or those who were possibly struggling against the turbulent and unpredictable currents of adult life – it mattered not!

In addition, he also possessed an incredible propensity to slaughter the overblown arguments of those who did not subscribe to his highly valid and strenuously acute beliefs on education, music, politics, religion and sport.

That innate distinction was the cardinal source of the peerless effect he had on each discentem under his charge.

He never had to bully. One glance from under his eloquent eyebrows was worth more than fifty bellows from more limited natures. Scholars did not fear his wrath, they dreaded his disapproval. His judgement on the priorities of edification was so sound, his authority so effortless, that a shake of his head inflicted an embarrassment from which the only rescue was the expeditious recovery of his approval.

Yet, it was his timbre tones that seduced and beguiled each of his passionate tyro's, that of which would see him - intermittently – and quite intentionally - exhibit a false, bewildered facial expression in reaction to some problematic interpretations from the classroom floor – this when his tongue was firmly held in cheek – a trifling but highly sophisticated ploy to unreservedly promote student comprehension et al - and unequivocally confirm the painstaking process of implanting subject inculcation collectively – of which we all benefitted – no one was ever left behind.

He shall therefore be remembered as an unforgettable and dominant linchpin, - and so similar to a great deal of others of his generation who dwelt within our locality during an era when society was, to a degree, more at peace with itself – ergo; the fifties and sixties essentially - meritorious longevity was bestowed on these ebullient and inimitable elders as a direct result of their insatiable desire to remain as part of the tenement-clustered community of which they too were raised – simple and self-effacing souls

who were once positioned at the forefront of the metaphorical 'coalface' - but who valiantly evolved as esteemed, emeritus exiles from an earlier and reprehensibly inhumane epoch.

They came to secure this eminent presence within the enclosure of our Caledonian kibbutz, not merely for what they had achieved over the course of their protracted continuance – but for their sheer grit and near audacious aspirations to stay 'connected' with everything and everyone within their societal and genealogical niche following retirement – accordingly; a communal habitat which had provocatively prevailed during two world wars, much to the displeasure of both Kaiser and Fuhrer respectively, this double trauma being tragically coupled to the indeterminate dreadfulness of the 1929 depression – and the [worldwide] consequences which would ultimately unfold from the fiscal irresponsibility of Wall Street 'players' during that catastrophic hiatus from mortal sanity.

Little wonder therefore that an abundance of senior citizens from my boyhood era were unabashedly cloaked in unambiguous approbation and perpetual affection for their 'against-all-odds' survival instincts and resolute robustness – and in the face of expeditious annihilation – that of which is referred to in the 'Book of Revelations' as, "Armageddon" – an insufferable status quo that was a long way removed from the political pledges and superficial vows of the UK's democratically elected and entrusted suzerains - of both the pre and post WW1 era.

With my fingers currently flitting over the keyboard with space-travel like tempo - and with one's psyche now utterly awash with recollections of childhood days – I sense that my otherwise deep-rooted and defiant sangfroid, is being speedily conquered by an all-consuming agitation, that being borne out of one's comparisons to elders past - and elders present– why oh why do we, the human components of a rather 'exclusive club', so desperately and wretchedly struggle to decamp from a base of which we no longer have a place - and woefully err in pragmatically clinching the retiral (sic) phase of life's glorious journey – unlike our ancestors?

For no less than two full years following my own enforced detachment from lifelong travail – I too toiled miserably from the horrors of assuming one's new social designation within the world order, (OAP) – and soon perched

myself atop a scrapheap of melancholy - wholly bereft of visionary capability or strident purpose – thus lacking the key pre-requisites to go forth and conquer as the metaphorical ‘elder statesman’?

During the dark days that made-up these early retirement years – and there were a few - I should have turned the mythical corner and exited ‘Bemusement Boulevard’ - then kept walking along ‘Freedom Road’ to see if my former educationalist was striding ahead of me – the mere presence of Mr. Carmichael would have incontrovertibly had a shrivelling effect on my then unwillingness to embrace the future – and that of the uncertainty that one’s retirement years may - or quiet possibly would – all-too vividly promulgate – this as the parabolic ‘gloves’ were reluctantly being hung up for the final time.

Yet, I didn’t, it was the then ‘present’ that consumed me during that near debilitating juncture – and not the past – oh, the barrenness and ultimate perils of a once busy existence – but overcome I eventually did, thanks largely to the persistent encouragement of a long suffering spouse, a brace of adult professional offspring – and an all-inspiring, unbelievably agile, blue-rinsed septuagenarian by the name of Mrs Higgins – more on this divine example of gifted human femininity to follow in my summary below.

Since enthusiastically, (if not belatedly) entombing one’s earlier-day gremlins deep within a sepulcher of perpetuity – I have frequently, but inwardly, theorized and relentlessly hypothesized - to [stoically] identify with the specific rationale - or prime reasons that lay behind international retirement angst – entwining those intrinsic foibles which remain incontestably and vividly apparent throughout the vast number of fretful communiqués that I scan and inwardly ingest on a regular basis. (Via this wonderful website)

One has does not have to be a supreme forensic expert, nor that of a scrupulous coroner, to successfully dissect the root cause of cerebral perturbation – that which affects considerable clusters of contemporary retirees globally – retirement not merely heralds the end of working life, it can and indeed does, bring with it a wrongful diagnosis - stemming from a perverted and unqualified self determination’ – suggesting that, “The work days are over – and now I am old” – Age then sickeningly positions itself as

the paramount and discomposing feature in our day-to-day transience – not material possessions, not financial issues - and certainly not solitude, the latter of which is a predominant, preferred state-of-grace for Lord knows how many – in due course they are sited alone within the confines of their retirement domiciles and inanely contemplate what to specifically do next with their new-found liberty – if anything at all! – I was that guy!

As most readers of my transcript thus far, will have rightfully come to the conscientious conclusion, that the somewhat bullish author of this opinionated narrative, is not one who may be considered as a semantic dummy or linguistically challenged buffoon – of which I'm certainly not, yet, I nevertheless stick to my wholehearted, and, dare I say, sagacious claim, that the menacing malady which ruthlessly undermines the '20-20' focus and once industrious pluck of downcast retirees, has its origins in the self-registration of misconceived uselessness by virtue of age - essentially when working life uninvitingly draws to a close - and as we erroneously identify with our 'on-the-shelf' deliverance as little more than a detestable relocation from professional purpose - to that of deprecatory despair – we then pitifully indulge in male cow excrement logic - at best!

From my perspective, retirement brings with it an anesthetizing effect – thus numbing one's self- evaluation of true worth – one moment we are thriving and productive cynosure's in a cut and thrust sphere of initiative and accomplishment – the next, we are excess baggage, where eviction from a once functional, systematic and fruitful setting is laid bare – akin to that of our otherwise sound levels of profundity and percipience – each factor excruciatingly exhibiting a 'Mother Hubbard' actuality – heralding nothing on the job front – and nothing in the physiological wallet to fill our deprived larder – yet this synopsis is not as a result of age – it is connected purely to compos mentis impairment, a near escapable malaise that mercilessly blights the emotional wellbeing of stratospheric numbers of retirees everywhere.

We are each victims of our 20th Century birthdays, an epoch that, relatively speaking, espoused far greater opportunity and freedom than that of the afore-mentioned, less privileged Homo sapiens who endured on 'bread and dripping' values, many moons ago.

Irrespective of the massive distance in time that now separates me from the afore-mentioned, distinguished doyens of yester-year; and despite negative, clarion calls regarding their irrelevance and inconsequential influence in the grand scheme of things 21st Century – they have nevertheless bequeathed upon us a fitting legacy pertaining to the undeniable values of social intercourse and communal integration – back to an era when personal communication was a face-to-face phenomenon – free from the anonymity of emails, internet conveyance and/or mobile telephones.

Physical contact brought with it an abundance of plusses...and negatives too – yet, no matter if local conversation brought with it a pot pourri of despondency, disquiet or delight – human contact during that earlier juncture, instilled neighborly compassion, care and camaraderie on a scale that is largely unknown to big city and large township dwellers modern day – we are becoming slaves to the electronic world - and prisoners within our own homes because of saturating technological 'advances' – we as retired people, voluntary remain in a state of retreat – consumed with idiotic apprehension, thus denying ourselves the opportunity to integrate with those of a similar or younger/older disposition - ultimately damming our chances of securing the splendid longevity of our forefathers – laced with the chilling promise that fewer numbers shall stand at our graveside when the 'big' moment unavoidably arrives.

Aged we possibly are, yet more aged we shall unnaturally and speedily become – all thanks to divorcing ourselves from physical interaction and independent involvement with mankind.

My latter comment may not be of major concern to many who are scanning these lines today, however, I would personally reel at the abhorrent suggestion that those attending my ultimate inhumation, would be made up of attendees who knew of my email address and/or mobile phone number, but never had the pleasure of making my bodily acquaintance – ye Gods – a fate even worse than death methinks!

My own day of liberty from the inflexible and unyielding shackles that once bound me to nefarious nonentity – finally arrived during a morning visit to my nearby gymnasium, circa three years ago. As I crossed the threshold to

this essential and very familiar facility, an undertaking that I carry out on a five times per week basis, my attention was immediately drawn to a gaggle of 'mature' representatives of the Berkshire community, ardently strutting their stuff on the unused basketball court – and powerfully singing along to the music that accompanied their group workout – I was in awe!

Their session finished shortly afterwards – and soon, thirty or so glowing and decidedly sweaty participants emerged from the arena, at best, a gaggle of antiquated, but hugely ebullient souls, who nattered in a manner that one would associate with an unruly band of schoolchildren – “See you next Thursday” – and - “I hope you have no aches and pains tomorrow” - being the general thrust of the highly audible chit-chat amongst the exiting group – I inwardly smiled and nodded approvingly at those who caught my eye as they hastily made for the car park outside.

Given the undeniable fact that most, if not all of the participants on the day, would never see 70 years of age again – my sense of inquisitiveness drove me into the hall to speak with the session leader, a lady with seventy-four summers under her belt - and one who goes by the name of Sheila Higgins. (She will forgive me for naming her in this article – I hope!!!)

As she addressed the issues surrounding my general intrigue and irrepressible admiration – I was duly informed that she held classes for her old and bold friends on the thrice-weekly arrangement, the youngest member being a spritely 73 year old, the most senior being a staggering 86!

She added further that I had arrived at the very moment when they were exercising and singing along to their favourite 'warm-down anthem – namely, the old soul song recorded by Frank Wilson; 'Do I Love You' (Indeed I do).

It was stressed to me by the sparkling team leader in question, that this simple but vibrant record was in-place for both physical AND psychotic reasons, in that all who undertook her 40—minute sessions, concluded their workout with an melodic appreciation of themselves and all they had achieved during the course of their respective lifetimes – and of no one else – at that particular moment, I finally lifted myself from the all-

consuming darkness and never looked back – slightly ashamed that it had taken the exertions of people much older than myself, to extol the priceless joys of life. No matter where we sit on the demographic ladder, it is there to be lived to the fullest – only if you want it, I certainly do!

As I now prepare to take flight and head to Edinburgh for the fitting farewell of a former teacher, I am reminded of a quote by the 16th Century Philosopher, Francis Bacon, “We cannot conceive of any end or limit to our world – but always as of necessity, it occurs to us that there is something beyond”.

Let this be the credo for all who are either retired - or soon to be retired.

Fortuna!