

I

Terms of Reference

Som unknown Joys there be
Laid up in Store for me;
To which I shall, when that thin Skin
Is broken, be admitted in.

THOMAS TRAHERNE, "SHADOWS IN THE WATER"

THOMAS TRAHERNE CALLED TO mind what it was like to be a child, by telling how in his "unexperienced Infancy" he was fascinated by the reflections he could see in puddles. He met another world "By walking Men's reversed Feet"; but he could not reach the people he could see down there, upside down in the water. "A Film kept off that stood between." He could imagine earth and heaven as two adjacent but separated worlds, with hope that there might in due course be a way from the one to the other.¹

If one looks at fish in an aquarium, the same image comes to life. They cannot see out. Looking into the side of the tank at their level, through the water up to the surface, what one sees is an opaque boundary, like a silver ceiling. But people above the fish tank can look down into the water and see the fish swimming about in their everyday world below.²

1. This chapter is based upon my Leveson Lecture 2005, at Temple Walsall, Birmingham.

2. I first suggested this image in "The Experience of Aging" in *Concilium* (1991); and referred to it in my *Making Good*, 118–19; and in my Leveson Lecture "The Experience of Aging" 2005, 13–14.

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We cannot see out of the aquarium of human life, but it appears to be lit from above and some of its contents seem to have arrived from elsewhere. The analogy is not supposed to provide proof that beyond the limits of our sight there is a heaven full of people, where we shall one day be admitted in. What the image offers is not a claim but a disclaimer: a hopeful way of acknowledging our present ignorance, so as not to be defeated by it.

A dead goldfish will float to the surface of the water and somebody will take it away. It will not aspire to be reborn up above in a different environment, breathing our air. The image of human beings inhabiting a fish tank is what used to be called a “conceit,” a bright idea which should be life-enhancing and even illuminating, but is not meant to be taken too solemnly. It can suggest to would-be Christians who need encouragement a practical notion of one-way visibility.

Not all Christian believers are as limited in their vision as fish in an aquarium, and some have had experiences of being “caught up to the third heaven,”³ but most people have in common our ordinary inability to see out. At times when prophecy is muted, when the good news is coming through faintly and it is too easy to believe that this life is all there is, a whimsical image may help to banish despondency.

The disclaimer announced by making a start with swimming fish underlies all the arguments of this book. I do not imagine that I can see out of the fish tank into the world beyond. I have to start more prosaically from where I am and look around from my own particular point of view. Since the inhabitants of our world are far more diverse than fish in a tank, I must not dogmatize about what other people may be able to see, but I can report on what the universe looks like to me. A Christian who has been living in the aquarium and wondering about reality through eight decades need not suppose that she ought to claim some supernatural vision, but she should by now have something to say to commend the faith she does hold. The fish tank provides the terms of reference. The perspective of an argumentative octogenarian is the less fanciful starting point.

How can someone who belongs to the twentieth century and inevitably looks backwards presume to look forwards, and say anything constructive about Christian belief in the twenty-first century? The fatal phrase “When I was young” can foster a downhearted frame of mind. The assumptions people make now seem to have changed; the church looks irrelevant, especially on a Sunday morning; intelligent good people are not so much incredulous

3. 2 Cor 12:2–4.

about the Christian faith as ignorant about what they are supposed to believe; the things that mattered in one's youth are discounted . . . How are the children of the millennium going to finish the sentence, "My grandmother used to say . . ."? When I was taken to church as a child, it was a worrying thought that the congregation seemed to consist entirely of elderly ladies. When they had gone, would Christian belief die out? As time went by, I realized that every new generation is aging. Congregations still seem to consist largely of elderly ladies; and now I have become one of them. I have the responsibility to encourage the people following on now and not to put difficulties in their way. Taking stock of my position is not a matter of supposing that I know best. It is a matter of identifying a quantity of data that has gradually accumulated and which needs sorting out to make it more readily available.

Rather than a mathematical proof, QED, of another world beyond, an old Christian should be able to offer an *apologia*, a progress report on the live possibility of faith. While youth is discovering new ideas, age can set about collecting and presenting ideas already given, like the householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old,⁴ in this case mostly old. Arranging what one has learnt and offering it to one another is not pointless wool-gathering.

The experience an octogenarian has to offer is likely to be a complex mixture of maturity gained and strength lost. If one thinks of all humanity, this particular starting point has been rare. Most human beings have never been so old. But today more people reach a time when they have not only outlived their parents and grandparents, as was to be expected, but have grown older than their parents and grandparents ever grew. Old age is nowadays a normal enough experience to serve as a introductory case study for pondering whether faith in God is borne out by life.

To begin by describing what human existence looks like, from the viewpoint of someone who has lived for a good while, can be a way of rooting theology in experience, rather than flying off into fantasy. Anyone who wants to commend the Christian faith must look seriously at the character of the world where we have to live. Longevity offers a sample of ordeals and joys, which provide a context for the question whether the universe in which we are placed can possibly be, in fact, an antechamber to heaven. The characteristic blessings and trials of age invite attention to the ordinary ambivalence of human life, which supplies the raw material for any realistic worldview. Can

4. Matt 13:52.

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we really believe that it was a good Creator who placed us here? Is life too arbitrary, too pointless, indeed too grim, as people actually find it, to have been inaugurated by a good God? Can glory prevail over gloom?

Long before they grow old, human creatures have to come to terms with the passing of time, whether for celebration or regret. The compulsory experience of aging is more than an extra concluding stage. It belongs to human life all along. Aging does not begin at eighty or seventy, nor even at sixty. We have all been growing older as far back as our memories go. We keep on leaving our junior selves behind. Realizing that one is *too* old may start at three, four, five . . . It begins with being told not to be a baby: “You’re a big girl now.” The little brother is the one on her lap, while the older sister has the alarming adventure of going to school. As people get older the pace quickens and they add year to year rather than month to month: not “five and a half exactly” but “in his fifties.”

Human beings have assorted incompatible prejudices about what aging means. Fears of “crabbed age” and dodderly feebleness compete with hopes of continuing to grow up towards respected maturity. Some of us, when we consider whether life is good, find it reassuring that the ordinary is as authentic as the ecstatic and the agonizing. If there is indeed a God who made us, God is evidently not too majestic to make room for triviality as well as grandeur.

There are small-scale benefits of aging that are not too insignificant to be counted as valid encouragements, making space for hopefulness lest gloom about our prospects should take over. There comes a time when one is offered a tolerant or even a respectful hand down the steps. It stops being compulsory to regard plunging into cold water as a treat. There are requirements, like wearing fashionable but uncomfortable clothes, which there is no need to try to meet. Better still, it is not one’s responsibility to say No to enterprising and argumentative children when really one is on their side.

Experience cannot be counted on to bring wisdom, but it may well bring prudence. One finds out how to recognize in advance some of the toes one might tread on and the foolish mistakes one might make. People who have learnt by trial and error to take more care may find that instead of being more fearful they can be braver. To be gauche is an affliction of immaturity. To grow out of feeling awkwardly juvenile may allow the fun of being a little eccentric.

The experience of aging is less uniform than ever, now that more of us live longer, growing old in variegated ways, both for ill and also for good.

When people grumble about the modern world as if all its changes were for the worse, they should consider modern medicine. Keats died at 26 of tuberculosis. Jane Austen died at 42. Today they could surely have lived longer and left us more of their work. Shakespeare's "old John of Gaunt" could be called "time-honored" in his fifties;⁵ and Shakespeare himself died at 52. A good many of our contemporaries have recovered from illnesses that would have killed them a hundred years ago. Modern medical skills have given us a reasonable hope for a sort of slab of good time interposed between middle age and departure. People retire from their jobs but not from satisfying activity.

Getting older can be compared with making mayonnaise. The more oil is already put in, the more stable the emulsion is and the bolder one can be about adding the oil faster. Protecting elderly people from upsetting innovations is too easy a stereotype. Grandparents may allow themselves to be less shockable than the younger ones who are in the thick of the struggle and have to take the responsibility. Young people are sometimes surprisingly conformist in following the current fashions, even when they think they are being rebellious. Old people can risk saying what they really think.

Of course the aged are not to be typecast as tranquil or as lively, any more than they should be typecast as easily upset. It is neither respectful nor kind to foist upon old people the notion that they must all reach "exalted standards of serenity and wisdom."⁶ Elders are still individuals, tiresome and splendid in different ways, as much as young people are. To treat them as distinct characters, to take the trouble to find out what they are really like, is one main way to honor them.

There are indeed blessings to be realized and aging people do well to encourage one another to look around them as well as looking back. There is a big But to be faced. Whatever good we find ourselves able to say about getting old must not be unsaid, but it must be balanced by what needs to be said on the other side.

Longevity cannot be relied upon to provide plain evidence that God is good. It would be smug and insensitive to join unthinkingly in singing the praises of the stage of life that is now being called the "third age."⁷ The longer people live, the clearer it becomes that the experience of aging is not monochrome. For some people aging does mean maturing; for many

5. Shakespeare, *Richard II*, I, 1, 1.

6. Coleman, "Is Religion the Friend of Aging?" 18.

7. *Ibid.*, 12.

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it means becoming more decrepit. Some of us achieve our long-standing goals and some of us realize that there are plenty of happy experiences that we shall never have or never have again.

The passage of time does indeed endow some people with “honor, love, obedience, troops of friends.”⁸ Some of us are blessed with the awe-inspiring delight of seeing our children’s children⁹ and even our children’s grandchildren. Some, like the Psalmist, “shall bring forth more fruit in their age: and shall be fat and well-liking.”¹⁰ *But*, likewise, it is just as ordinary an experience for relentless time to take away the everyday blessings that people could once take for granted and leave them with the prospect of “second childishness and mere oblivion.”¹¹ Our seniors are not there any more and then one by one our friends depart. It is not realistic to expect many octogenarians to go on from strength to strength like Titian, Verdi, or Gladstone.

For all the wonders of modern medicine, it is still true that what doctors can do for their patients is patchy. As people grow older in the twenty-first century there are still plenty of damaging disabilities lying in wait for them. Many people become too frail to go on living in their own familiar homes. Many more are cut off from comfortable sociability by deafness. There are still a large number who lose the sight of their eyes: which happens with special cruelty to scholars who depend on reading. When someone past threescore years and ten has a human lapse of memory, the word “Alzheimer” trips readily off our tongues, perhaps in the hope that we can fight fear better by naming it.

The characteristic hopeful and good aspects of aging seem mostly to belong to the time of life so agreeably commended as the “third age.” We have to face the fact that at some time, and, it must be emphasized, at some unpredictable time, the “fourth age” begins. People’s lives are suddenly or gradually dismantled; and reorganizing their belongings and their habits is not the positive experience that moving house can be in one’s youth. Growing old happens to people in random good and bad ways: gentle for some, traumatic for others. However cheerfully people celebrate their birthdays, most of them would prefer their time to pass more slowly. They certainly do not look forward to becoming really old.

8. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V, 3, 23.

9. Ps 128:7.

10. Ps 92:13.

11. Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II, 7, 163.

One of the hardest things for people who are used to being reasonably effective is becoming a back number. The battles we won or lost in our youth evidently do not matter any more and the comprehension we reached is no longer relevant. The things we learnt the hard way are now of no account. In days gone by, people used to honor their seniors and pity little children. That is reversed now. Children are important people and it is the aged who are pitiable. Respecting the elderly means being polite to them and trying to provide them with comfortable surroundings. It does not mean asking for their advice.

Teilhard de Chardin in *Le Milieu Divin* introduced his Christian optimism by starting with an eloquent acknowledgement of what he called the “diminishments” of human life.¹² In a section forbiddingly called “The passivities of diminishment”, he identified “that slow, essential deterioration which we cannot escape: old age little by little robbing us of ourselves and pushing us on towards the end . . . what a formidable passivity,” he exclaimed, “is the passage of time . . .”¹³ He meant, I take it, the fearful inexorable uncontrollability of time moving on.

It is the arbitrariness, the lack of control, which hits hard. When one reaches the age of outliving one’s contemporaries and going to more funerals than weddings one finds oneself helplessly asking Wordsworth’s inexorable question, “Who next will drop and disappear?”¹⁴ Robert Browning wrote characteristically, “Grow old along with me: the best is yet to be”,¹⁵ but in fact Elizabeth Barrett Browning did not grow old along with her husband.

A major reason for pessimism that is apt to be in the front of people’s minds, often nominated as *the* major trouble the prospect of aging brings, is the fear of losing their autonomy. People say, “I don’t mind so long as I don’t get dependent” and what they mean is only too clear. Helplessness is a dreadful trial, even to the extent of undermining people’s humanity; but perhaps some of even this worry may be over-emphasized. Heaven forbid that autonomy should be reckoned as not important; but when it is built up as the one thing that matters, it is time to be counter-suggestible.

There is a balance to correct. A tendency is appearing, in the name of “respect for persons,” for autonomy to be so valued as to become an idol.

12. Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Milieu Divin*.

13. *Ibid.*, 60–61.

14. Wordsworth, “Extemporary Effusion Upon the Death of James Hogg,” *Poetical Works*, vol. IV, 277.

15. Browning, “Rabbi Ben Ezra,” stanza 1, *Dramatis Personae* in *Poems*, vol. I, 777–81.

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In everyday life we are all dependent in all manner of ways, not all of them bad nor even regrettable. Some people bake their own bread or service their own cars, but few of us eat entirely home-grown food or make all our own clothes, and we should not be better and stronger people if we did. The support of other people, known and unknown to us, sets us free to develop whatever particular capacities may be our own.

Dependence is a matter of degree and the extent to which human beings find it irksome is also a matter of degree. For some people, young and old, what they want and need is to be allowed to fend for themselves, to act on their own, to take risks, to have adventures. Their families and friends are bound to worry, but they do their part by not interfering. For other people, freedom is more alarming and letting themselves be mollycoddled is a temptation, not an affliction. Those are the ones who need stirring up to value their autonomy more. Laziness that battens on other people, and can be quite unscrupulous, is unmistakably a *sin*. Let me agree; but let me say, on the other side, that prickly pride, taking its stand on independence, is a sin that is still less endearing. It is more graceful to acknowledge our indebtedness with gratitude than never to incur any indebtedness. When someone's friends and neighbors take real pleasure in being kind, it is best to humor them, to take their arms and walk with them. It is fitting to receive their goodwill gratefully, rather than to rebuff them even in the name of autonomy.

It is a pity to set up a self-defeating competition for the status of helper rather than helped. "She is the sort of woman who lives for others—you can always tell the others by their hunted expression."¹⁶ William Wordsworth learnt a more promising lesson from the old Cumberland beggar, that one way of being good to people is to allow them the pleasure of being generous. The "poorest poor," or we might substitute the "oldest old," can be glad when they find out how they *themselves* can bless and encourage other people, truly doing them a favor by happily appreciating their help. The hand down the steps, or the seat in the bus, convey two-way blessings. The morality that Christians are supposed to have learnt is concerned with *interdependence*, reciprocity, bearing one another's burdens.

The argument has been weaving about from good to bad and back again; and this is intentional. The point of this "on the one hand"—"on the other hand" argument, this mixture of appreciation and foreboding, is to approach the possibility of faith and the question mark human troubles

16. Quoted by C. S. Lewis's devil Screwtape in *The Screwtape Letters*, Chapter 26.

put against it, by continually keeping hold of truthfulness. To be counter-suggestible may be the most honest stance to take up. Sometimes we should decline to think what we are told to think and refuse to relax in a given point of view. “Yes but” is often an apt response.

Truth demands that we shall not call anything good when we ought to know that it is not. We need not, we *must* not, adopt a relentlessly rosy outlook and pretend that length of life is bound to be splendid, as if anyone who finds it a burden must be ungrateful or faint-hearted. That does not mean that what we need is a compromise, some sort of middle view. It is easy but not much help to say that we find old age to be partly good and partly bad, so that we can be *moderately* content about growing old. That is honest enough; but only by not saying anything in particular.

There is a slogan that is more useful than “either/or” or “half and half”; and that is “both/and.” Truth is found, not by denying one set of facts, nor by sitting on the fence, but by setting contraries alongside each other and trying to be fair to each of them. The optimists and the pessimists about old age are both justified. Looking at what our world is like, we have to say that human life is full of hope *and* fear. If optimism is to prevail, this will not happen by people refusing to recognize the fear and saying “Of course it’s all for the best,” but by people doing something about what makes us afraid.

There is plenty which is being done about the troubles that beset people at different stages of their lives, and plenty more that could be done; and there are many people who indeed are doing it. Indeed one should say “both/and” again about these apparent alternatives, doing or thinking. Human beings are the kind of animal that both thinks and acts. Their thinking itself is something they *do*; and most of them think in order to prepare for doing. Thinking is not usually an academic exercise, separate from action. It has practical results. Taking thought lays the foundations for realistic activity. If people today think justly about growing old, people tomorrow may act wisely and the optimists may realistically hope to prevail over the pessimists. Meanwhile it has to be acknowledged that at present both have reason on their side.

When we really must call aging a struggle, we may hope to find it an exhilarating struggle. We need not leave one another to struggle in isolation. People can set about encouraging each other to find every stage of human life worthwhile, appreciating one another’s achievements and honoring their experience, not least if they are fortunate enough to find the Christian story about human life believable.

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Rather than either resigning themselves to becoming more and more out of date, or making foolish efforts to be trendy, they can be encouraged by ancient words which link past and future together: “Walk about Zion, and go round about her: and tell the towers thereof”—and the point of the excursion is—“that ye may tell them that come after.”¹⁷ People who take heed of past history rather than casually setting it aside will be more careful about demolishing it and may be enabled to build on it more securely. Without presuming to instruct new generations about how to go on from here, they can invite attention to the foundations on which we are standing. The contribution of a theologian, trained as a philosopher, should be to consider, in the light of all the data, what is the truth about the universe and its inhabitants.

SAMPLE

17. Ps 48:11–12.