

The Ellard Collection

Middle age

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The late Dr John Ellard, revered former Editor of *Modern Medicine of Australia* and *Medicine Today* and a distinguished psychiatrist, wrote many essays in the 1970s and 1980s on society's most controversial and vexing issues. Many were published in *Modern Medicine*, and later a selection from this and other journals were chosen by Professor Gordon Parker, then Professor of Psychiatry at the University of New South Wales, for publication in 1989 as the book *Some Rules for Killing People*.¹ By popular request, we plan to reproduce selected essays from time to time. The first of these, 'Middle age', originally appeared in a 1983 issue of *Modern Medicine of Australia*.

We are told that in spring our fancy turns to love, but where will it turn in autumn? We begin our journey with an endless prospect before us, but as the years pass the mountains close in and cast their shadows, and the horizon, once unattainable, is now visible and final. Middle age is when we first look back over our shoulders and realise that our expedition is halfway there.

Before I discuss middle age I wish to make some cautionary statements. The first is that it is a very doubtful entity, and that you must not be misled into believing that it exists merely because I have been asked to discuss it and have agreed to do so. The second is that in my own work I pay little attention to developmental stages. They may well be useful abstractions, like the geometer's point, or the common good, but this does not mean that they exist. Life resembles an uninterrupted ride on a surfboard with its occasional necessary changes of balance and course more than it does a game of musical chairs, without the music. The third is that my observations are confined to those whose life and times are similar to my own. It is so because of limitations in time and knowledge. The fourth is that you must not fall into the error of believing that I know, or am supposed to know, what I am talking about. My only qualification for being here is that if there is such a thing as middle age I have survived it. I doubt that I know how or why any more than you do.

I do not propose to get involved in anything so tiresome and arbitrary as a definition, for here anyone's opinion is as good as his neighbour's. However, I have noticed that there comes a time when

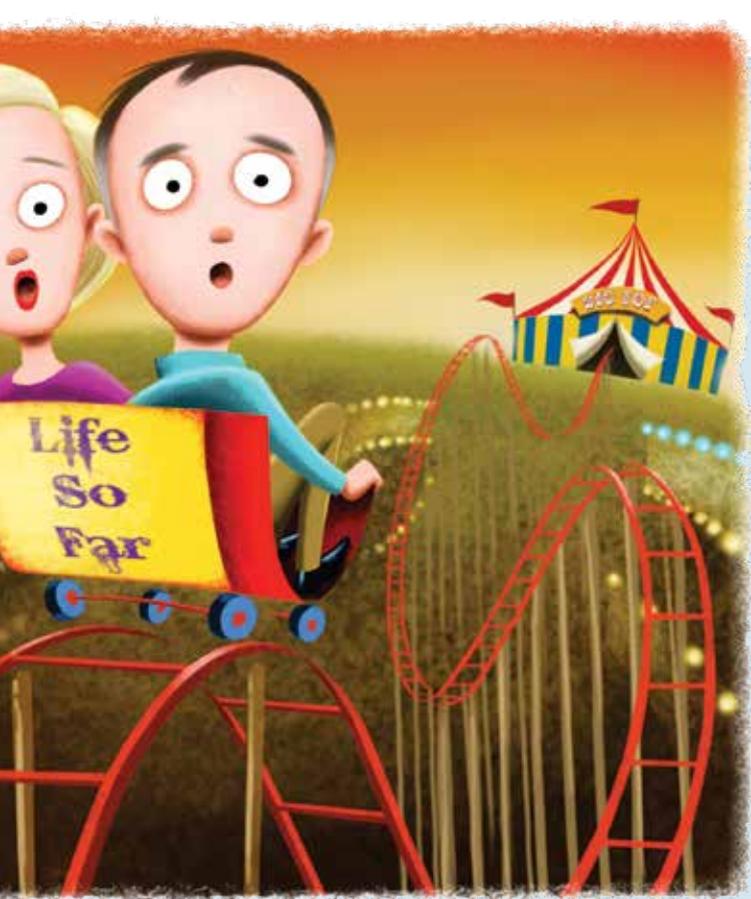
the thoughtful begin to count the years forwards rather than backwards. Instead of being impressed by the notion that they have survived forty years they become more impressed by the realisation that they will be fortunate to see another forty, and unusually fortunate if they find the experience in the main enjoyable. That change in the direction of outlook seems significant to me, and I would put middle age somewhere around there. Do not be as literal about it as was one elevated and obsessional personage who came to see me in a state of agitation and melancholy soon after his thirty-fifth birthday. He had read in the Bible that he was due for three score and ten years and half of his time had fled from him already. Again, if there is another definition which you prefer, then stick to it, for there is not much point in arguing about where to bisect a puff of smoke. Nevertheless, there are some things to be said, and some events to be identified and described. Of necessity, much of what I have to say will be autobiographical, albeit occasionally disguised. The essence of the middle years is that two fundamental processes which coexist in one's being gradually exchange their relative prominence. One is development, the other decay.

Maturation is not easy. I have found such growing up as I have encompassed a mixed experience. Sometimes there is the exultation of mastery, but more often one is conscious of a slow and sticky pulling away like a fly escaping from fly paper, leg after leg. There is the gradually acquired nodding familiarity with that particular minuscule portion of human knowledge needed for one's survival and advancement, and the accumulation of such friendships and treasure as fortune may bring. For most people, things are never better than they are in the middle years. They have, most of them, acquired such authority and standing as they are destined to achieve. Their children have reached some measure of independence and have learned what not to tell their parents. Their own parents are likely to be sprightly and self-supporting



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1. Ellard J. Some rules for killing people. Parker G (ed). Sydney: Angus and Robertson Publishers; 1989.



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still – for the first time our subjects are able to devote most of their time and effort to their own pleasures. They are getting there. It is as if one has survived the roar and the surge of rapids which had seemed endless, to find oneself drifting now in a quiet current under a tranquil sky. It takes a little time to see that the current is the edge of a slow whirlpool and that the frenzy of paddling which was so helpful before is not going to be much use now.

For this is the paradox. For most people in their middle years, development is proceeding more equably and more securely than ever it has before. Accordingly there is reason for confidence and pleasurable anticipation: the higher the vantage point, the greater the prospect and the desire. The Holden becomes a Mercedes and the house grows larger at a time when there is less need for it to do so. At the same time small irritations begin and become permanent. Reading glasses become mandatory, presbycusis makes conversation against background noise more difficult and the accumulated loss of teeth may make it necessary for the dentist to provide replacements. Recent memory is not to be depended upon and any teenager can make you seem to be in slow motion at any computer game. Exertion produces breathlessness more rapidly than it used to and one's larger children begin to offer to carry the heavier and more awkward burdens. The first of one's friends of an age similar to one's own dies, which sharpens one's appreciation of the changes in one's own person. New significance attaches itself to familiar events. Perhaps the oesophagitis of years' standing could really be the pain of myocardial ischaemia – better have an extra Quick-Eze – and today's diarrhoea not be due to last night's oysters but to a carcinoma of the bowel, already inoperable.

Apart from the threatened dissolution of one's body there are other things to contemplate. People of one's age who lose their jobs do not get another, because they are too old. Dog lovers have to realise that the dog after the present one will see them out, so

it will be necessary to devote some thought to its size and breed. The purchase of a tree for one's garden promotes, for the first time, the question of its rate of growth. If it is slow, it is prudent to buy an advanced specimen so as to be sure to enjoy its maturity. To put it shortly, as one's equipment at last begins to reach out towards its full efficiency one begins to discover worn bearings and large patches of rust.

There is another fundamental observation which begins to make itself felt. In an approximate way, one can imagine reducing the story of one's life so far to a graph. Internal and external forces will have located the points here and there, but there is enough constancy to ensure that the line has a form, that it does not map randomness. Given that half the points are now on the paper, and that outside of miracles and disasters the forces will not change much, the limits of the second half of the graph are predictable at a fair level of confidence. Most of us will not write the great novel, paint the haunting picture, marry the desirable multimillionaire or achieve eternal fame. Our sexual partners, our homes, our status, our ambience – none of them is likely to dazzle us and enchant us in the future if they do not do so now. There is a limit to the length and quality of our lives and there is no escaping it.

Reflections such as these do not engender peace of mind. There are many responses to them; in drawing attention to some of them I would not want it thought that they occur exclusively in this epoch.

Acceptance

The mature person can accept that there are certain immutables in life. He enjoys what he can, acknowledges the rest, and gets on with it.

Mutton dressed as lamb

It is sensible to remain young as long as you can. Some do it effortlessly: I know and have known in the past a few people in their eighties who have remained graceful, quick-minded and charismatic. They have become ageless, and effortlessly so. Few can do it: more often the trappings of youth are donned inappropriately and merely focus one's attention upon departed charms. We should all remember Hamlet's advice to those who paint an inch thick.

The pursuit of immortality

There are those who believe in their hearts that if they jog enough, choose their diet carefully enough and perform other selected rituals zealously enough, they may just possibly live forever. Many of them run along the beach near my home: past unhappy experiences cause me to keep an airway in a prominent position near the door.

Iron man

This is not quite the same as the pursuit of immortality. There, there is a striving for something not quite achieved, here there is a conviction of boundless energy and ultimate indestructibility. Mountains are climbed, the Minotaur is wrestled to the ground. As I hear of their sexual performances I think of new categories for the Olympic Games. It is often a successful defence well into

the other side of middle age. Once it is penetrated death is the only way out – it is not always involuntary.

The Jonestown solution

Everyone is entitled to locate heaven where he or she will. There is no shortage of orthodox geographies but in recent years the paths to eternity have multiplied greatly. No one can dispute the benefits of vitamins, meditation, swamis and many esoteric organisations. Everyone but the enchanted can see that too hot a pursuit of salvation may lead first to being singed, and then incineration.

In a glass, darkly

It has been remarked that when all else is lost, there is always the grog, an observation which many have accepted. There are other pathways to oblivion; it is one of the curiosities of mankind that those following one path usually heap scorn upon those committed to another. There is no need to elaborate upon the seductiveness of this particular refuge, nor upon some of the less agreeable outcomes.

In vivo auto-mummification

If the present is alarming, and the future beyond comprehension, the past may become irresistibly attractive. In the ordinary world, the bereaved magically keep alive the departed by turning into them, even if only partially and transiently. If one is heartsick enough, one may try to keep the whole past alive, by never leaving it. It is the desperate extremity of conservatism, met not so much in politics as in the drawing room, the club and the gun lobby. Unfortunately those who seek to return to this particular golden age are unable to get there and remain a burden for the rest of us.

Being successful

Some of my friends and some of my patients have certain qualities. They own large and expensive houses which they see only during the hours of darkness. They spend hours in committees with people whom they do not particularly like, directing the affairs of organisations about which they entertain a deep scepticism. They are so busy performing their professional duties that they have little time to step back and think about what they are doing, let alone to contemplate what the rest of the world is up to. Their families are not so much essential parts of their lives as fellow occupants of a lair to which they retreat. Much of their time with their children is spent in argument and mutual disapproval. They are wealthy, they wear uncomfortable clothes on hot days and they are always looking over their shoulders. No one really knows them but everyone knows their names. By Western standards they are successful. It takes a lot of hard work to achieve a disaster of this magnitude, unless, of course, you are born into one. It is not difficult to demonstrate the defensive nature of all this uproar: if circumstance separates these worthies from their preoccupations, many of them become lost and anxious until they can immerse themselves in reorganising the Cats' Home or some other institution and escape from their own beings again. This is a convenient point at which to turn away from major defences to some of the subplots. One of them is identity.

Identity

The problem of insufficient identity is familiar enough. Walter Mitty was the paradigm, for he came to life only when he was someone else. When the *Forsyte Saga* was being shown on television my consulting room was graced by several manifestations of Blanche, who may have had the same problem herself. It is an incomplete and uncertain state, fantasy bringing insufficient comfort. Few give much thought to the opposite problem, that of being embedded in one's identity so firmly and tightly that there is no possibility of deviation from a fixed pattern of existence. There are many organisations both spiritual and temporal which would have us live thus, for their own ends, and then one buys security (or what feels like it) at the expense of any further enrichment. Perhaps most successful is the spiralist, always moving upwards and centrifugally from one experience and career to another as he or she matures and the world changes. Not only does he encompass the new, but he can let go the old, a skill insufficiently cultivated in our acquisitive civilisation.

Relationships

You are entitled to any assortment of sexes, aspirations and outcomes you like: I would not like to be thought censorious. Nevertheless, particular patterns come to mind, apart from that of contentment.

Repetition–compulsion

We are all familiar with those unhappy souls fated to seek a state of intimacy and commitment, and then destroy it, repeating the cycle endlessly. The advent of early middle age often causes even the optimistic to see that the pattern is not going to depart spontaneously, and that they will have to do something about it. Within my experience they present a wide range of prospects. Some perceive the heart of the matter quickly and are able to navigate themselves securely enough thereafter, while others have had their capacity for trust and attachment so damaged that closeness can never lose its menace.

The end of avoidance

There are other deeper hurts. There are those – usually men – whose capacity for closeness is not impaired but crippled. Such relationships as they scratch together are impulsive, stormy and brief. Somewhere along the way they find that alcohol not only makes the world rosier, but also produces a circle of acquaintances at the pub or in the mess. Many of this circle will be similarly afflicted. I cannot count how many times someone has told me of his despair at realising that he knew nothing of men who had been his drinking companions for years and that their endless hours of conversation had been repetitious and empty. The pattern of drunkenness and failed relationships commonly begins in the late teens. By middle age the accumulation of physical and emotional damage may become more than can be supported, and the sufferer makes his exit one way or the other without much regret on his part, and without much applause from others.

Marital breakdown

If a marriage survives into middle age it probably had something going for it in the first place. One can guess that the participants

knew each other reasonably well, were sober as the sun rose on their wedding day and could perceive each other without too much distortion and idealisation engendered by their respective neuroses. Those encumbered with these difficulties have usually ended their marriages within the first several years, so they do not require our attention. After this initial period has passed the rate of attrition subsides but does not descend further. There are many reasons for the later breakdowns; two of them are frequent in those who come to see me.

There are those who have clung together because they are too anxious to do anything else. They have had many explanations for staying together, and there is some substance in all of them. They did not wish to upset the children, their aged parents would be mortified, they could not afford to maintain two residences and someone had to stay home with the cat. But now the children are out most nights, their parents don't care, there is enough money and the cat has died from old age. Marital unhappiness now becomes revealed as the price paid for a refuge from independence. It is important not to make any decisions on behalf of such a couple, nor to be manoeuvred into seeming to do so. The fear that they cannot stand separated and alone may be well founded, and if they do separate the total suffering may be greater.

The second group comprises those who have matured at different rates, or in different directions. It is fortunate when both partners can see that their needs are now so disparate that separation offers their only hope of happiness. When one matures and the other remains infantile and dependent, very powerful emotions may arise, some of them dangerous.

Single middle-aged women

Since men die earlier than women, and since the divorce rate is rising, there is an increasing number of middle-aged women who are single, and who wish to find a partner for the rest of their lives. Their male counterparts are fewer and interested in younger women. The women complain that the men they meet are married and predatory, elderly and looking for a nurse, alcoholic, homosexual, or so unlovable that no woman in her right mind would want to associate with them.

As patients, the women ask where they can find a reasonable selection of unmarried, interesting and attractive men prepared to form permanent attachments. It is a deadly serious question and I do not know the answer. In addition to such well-established meeting places as the self-help groups, the bars and the clubs, there are agencies charging several hundred dollars or more for attempting to remedy the situation. I wish I knew their success rates, but by nature of his calling a psychiatrist is more likely to see the unhappy than the satisfied. I have a great sympathy for those in this difficulty. I suspect that those who pursue particular interests through associations devoted to those interests fare better than those who advance upon the opposite sex directly.

Sex in middle age

The sexual difficulties reported by the middle aged are not peculiar to that time of life and require little attention here. Probably the

most common request of the psychiatrist is that the patient be told how to enjoy sex with A, to whom the patient is married, instead of with B, with whom the patient is in love. I do not know the answer to this question either. It is relatively uncommon for sexual difficulties to be a primary cause of marital breakdown unless one partner has a firm inclination towards practices which the other regards as devious and repugnant. It is worth remarking that sexual difficulties presenting at this time which do not have an obvious psychogenesis are often physically determined. Alcohol, the side effects of medication, biologically caused depression, vascular disease affecting the blood supply of the penis and a host of other less common causes need to be considered when the diagnosis is obscure.

The menopause

I do not think that per se the physical changes of the female menopause are of much interest to the psychiatrist. Hot flushes may be distressing and embarrassing and atrophic vaginitis produces its own problems. There is evidence to suggest that those who have much trouble at the menopause in the absence of clear pathology have found something to complain about most of their lives. The topic has changed, but not much else. I have never found a psychiatric indication for the administration of sex hormones postmenopausally. I do not find the male menopause a useful concept.

Psychotic illness

Depression becomes increasingly common throughout life. As has been seen, there is quite a lot to be depressed about. Important losses (companions, health, job, children) occur and are not always immediately bearable. The biologically determined depressions become more frequent as does paranoid schizophrenia. The early dementias appear, mostly due to alcohol, but some to the pre-senile dementias, cerebral vascular changes and other somatic disease. Careful investigation is mandatory.

What to do when you get there

Some negotiate middle age with élan while others begin to accelerate downwards. There is no shortage of oracles ready to tell you what to do for the best. Some will tempt you with promises of eternal bliss while others will pursue you with damnation. If you profess a religion it would seem prudent to follow it earnestly, for if your luck is in and your beliefs are valid, then you will have won an infinity of beatitude. If not, you will still be an ornament to humanity, and gain much merit.

There are prescriptions of a lesser order. For example, one may quote with approval Lord Falkland's Rule, 'When it is not necessary to make a decision it is necessary not to make a decision', and Hartley's Second Law, 'Never sleep with anyone crazier than yourself'. To go beyond this is to risk becoming a latter-day Polonius. Backed into a corner, I would go so far as to say that I wish I had the strength of mind completely to grasp and to follow two precepts: that all permanence is illusion, and that the root of all suffering lies in wanting things.

They were good enough for the Buddha.

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