

# A life lived backwards: One man's experience of ageing An auto-ethnography

*Yehoshua*

*Old age ain't no place for cissies - Bette Davis*

It was a beautiful summer's day on Whale Beach north of Sydney. I was in the dressing shed after having just emerged from the surf. I looked at myself in the mirror and horror of horrors I saw my first facial wrinkle. It was then that I realised the ageing process had begun. I was 25 years old.

For the next 51 years, I had a ringside seat for my ageing process. At first it was landmarks like hair loss, thickening of the waist, my first grey hair. Later came teeth loss, the beginnings of arthritis, increasing presbyopia and the beginnings of short-term memory loss. Staying fit required more effort than before. Recovery after exertion (or a party) took longer. Erectile dysfunction began. Mid-life crisis came and went. Awareness of my own mortality slowly dawned. Instead of the sky being the limit, I was now looking downhill into my own grave. A terrible awareness of time and talents wasted seeped through me. I was sinking into the quicksand of ageing. Finally, I came to a point where I realised no matter how hard I tried, there was no longer any possibility of restoring my functioning to that of my halcyon days. I had finally arrived at old-age. I was now a full member of the old farts club.

**Methodological approach.** The methodological approach I will be using in this article is that of an auto-ethnography. It will be a personal narrative seen in the context of my social and cultural atoms. While it has no generalizability, I hope that parts will resonate with you, the reader, and that my strategies for dealing with my ageing process may prove useful.

**Narrative structure.** I will be structuring the narrative by starting with my childhood and early adulthood, then middle age and finally old age. I will also touch on the principles I am attempting to apply in dealing with my ageing process.

I am starting my narrative by briefly describing my childhood social and cultural atoms. I believe that to understand my method of dealing with the ageing process it is necessary to know my beginnings and the trajectory of my personal development towards old age.

I am using the cultural conserve labels of Middle Age and Old Age only as convenient pegs on which to hang the narrative. There is no sharp distinction between the stages of my life. My awareness of ageing started when I was age 25 and progressed seamlessly to age 76.

**The title.** The title “A Life Lived Backwards” refers to the phenomenon of my achieving my major childhood ambitions in the second half of my life rather than in the first. Also, all my university degrees were obtained in the second half and haven’t stopped yet.

## **Childhood and early adulthood**

In this section, I will outline the major influences that shaped my experience of the ageing process and my approach to dealing with it.

### ***My childhood Social Atom***

I was born in 1941 in Sydney, Australia, the eldest of two children. My father was born in Australia of Scottish parents who migrated to Australia around 1910. My mother was born in England of Cornish parents who migrated in 1926, after eight years living in South Africa. Both my parents were born and raised in the Catholic religion. They were both adversely affected by the 1930s depression. Neither completed high school. My father eventually became a skilled stonemason and my mother took dressmaking and cleaning jobs when she could. They sub-rented several rooms in a house rented by my maternal grandparents, in slum conditions, in an inner Sydney suburb.

My father was a combat soldier in the Australian Army during the 1939-45 war. He fought in the in New Guinea campaign. He returned with malaria and “war neurosis.” He self-medicated heavily with alcohol until his death at age 70 of liver failure. There was also a culture of alcohol abuse in my maternal grandparent’s home.

My mother had no friends of her own. She tried to make me her constant companion (without success). When I was around age 7 she became withdrawn, and began to hallucinate about being persecuted by neighbours and passers-by and remained this way throughout my

childhood and adolescence. Since I could no longer rely on her for emotional support, I became emotionally self-reliant.

### *My personal development*

I was born 6 weeks premature and was kept in a humidicrib. When I was removed, I had a whole-body skin disorder requiring me to be bathed in oil and wrapped in cotton wool for a further six weeks. This meant I did not experience prolonged human touch for the three months following my birth. As a consequence, I did not bond with my mother. This had serious consequences for all my relationships until I was age 42. I could not form attachments or function as part of a team. In group situations, I functioned as an observer, rather than a participant. I formed the conviction that I was a disappointment to my parents for not being “normal” at birth. I worked with this conviction in creative ways, whenever superiors or teachers had high expectations of me, I always managed to disappoint them.

I attended Catholic schools from kindergarten to year 12. I joined the school’s army cadet corps at age 12, rising to lieutenant rank at 15 years of age.

My greatest passion was aviation. On leaving school at age 16, I was chosen for the Royal Australian Air Force Academy as an officer cadet and trainee pilot. I experienced extreme military discipline by the staff and “bastardisation” by the senior cadets. This toughened me physically, mentally and emotionally. I learned courage, perseverance, resilience and attention to detail. I did not study adequately for the Bachelor of Science part of the course. As a result, I was a disappointment to the Commandant who admitted he had higher than usual expectations of me. He reluctantly discharged me at the end of the first year of the course. This failure has haunted me ever since.

I now had to find a new career. I tried being a bank clerk for a year but was dissatisfied. Instead, I turned to religion for the answer and joined the Franciscan Friars at age 18. I chose to be a trainee brother-friar even though I was educated enough to be a trainee priest-friar. At that time, the brothers spent their lives in manual and domestic work as servants of the priests. The seven years I spent as a friar taught me humility, patience, self-reflection, compassion and a love of silence. In the end, I could not tolerate the close community life in a friary (the feeling was mutual). I received a dispensation from the Pope and was allowed to leave the religious order. I was now age 25.

Once again, I searched for a career that would make me happy. I applied to the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) for pilot training. This was at the beginning of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. They couldn't understand why an ex-friar would want to drop bombs on people and offered me an immediate commission as an officer in the air traffic control branch which I accepted. I served in this capacity for ten years, from age 27 to 37.

Concurrent with rejoining the RAAF, I got married and started a family. The marriage lasted 12 years. True to form, I disappointed her to the point where she chose not to tolerate me any no longer.

**Mid-life crisis.** At age 34 I had a mid-life crisis. While I still performed my duties as an air force officer, I lost all interest in life. I experienced symptoms akin to clinical depression. I became painfully aware that my life was half over and I had achieved very little that was worthwhile. I had not achieved my childhood goal of becoming a pilot. I had not obtained a university degree. I was well behind my RAAF Academy classmates on the promotion ladder. Even in my local Catholic church parish I was regarded as a failed friar. My social life was a disaster. I had no real friends. I was ignored and avoided by my fellow officers. My wife and children were my social life. I felt I had no purpose other than being a husband and father.

**My journey to integrative catharsis.** At age 35, I started to emerge from my mid-life crisis and enrolled in a two-year, part-time, church-based counsellor training program. The training was conducted by a highly skilled, retired female psychiatrist. It consisted exclusively of self-awareness training in an encounter-style group. Eventually, I learned to connect with the group members. I experienced the beginnings of self-awareness and my journey to integrative catharsis began. I connected strongly with several group members who became auxiliaries on my journey. At this time, I abandoned the Catholic religion and became a humanist.

On leaving the RAAF, at age 37, I undertook a four-year full-time Bachelor of Social Work degree course. During my studies, I enrolled in a unit called "The Relaxation Response" where I learned the skill of autohypnosis. This skill proved highly valuable in my journey, and still does. After graduating, I sought psychotherapy training and chose gestalt therapy and psychodrama.

**Integrative catharsis achieved.** At age 42, I was the protagonist in a drama directed by Chris Hosking, at a psychodrama training workshop led by Dr Max Clayton. In this drama, I re-lived my experience in the humidicrib. I discovered that, at that time, physical touch was painful to me. Because of this and the lack of emotional and physical comfort being received from hospital staff, I saw human beings as my enemy and I determined to seek revenge on them.

This awareness led to an integrative catharsis which enabled me to restart my life. The most beneficial outcome of the drama was I no longer blamed myself for my failures. I realised I could not have done things differently at the time. I began to see myself as a handicapped person and ceased punishing myself for not being “normal.” My personal development, over the subsequent four years, was assisted by continuing to attend psychodrama training workshops led by Dr Max Clayton. I was also attending intensive gestalt therapy training workshops during this period. My regular practice of mindfulness, via autohypnosis, was also beneficial.

## **Middle age**

*It is never too late to become what you might have been - George Eliot, 1881*

### ***Career***

**Gestalt therapy practitioner.** I obtained my first university degree at age 41, established myself on the path to humanness at age 42 and qualified as a gestalt therapist at age 46. Although I had undergone 200 hours of psychodrama training with Dr Max Clayton, I decided to concentrate on gestalt therapy training instead. This was in response to Dr Clayton’s injunction to psychodrama trainees, in 1987, that they should focus on training in one modality at a time. Gestalt therapy seemed to better suit my stage of personal development. In other words, I was at the beginning of re-organizing the structure of my inner self and needed to practice a less demanding psychotherapy modality than psychodrama.

**Structural family therapy practitioner.** During the final year of my Bachelor of Social Work degree, I completed a structural family therapy internship at a local child guidance clinic. This changed my world view. I began to see individual, group and organisational behaviours as a product of the system rather than of the individual members.

**Experiential group psychotherapist.** From age 41 to 76, I have practiced experiential group psychotherapy with a family systems bent. Initially, I worked in the Vietnam Veterans' Counselling Service, then in NSW Community Health. For the past 30 years I have worked mostly in private practice.

**Commercial pilot and flight instructor.** At age 56, after a hands-on flight with an ex-client aircraft owner, I resumed pilot training. I obtained my commercial pilot licence and flight instructors rating at age 57, my senior flight instructors rating at age 58 and passed my air transport pilot licence theory exams at age 59. By day I worked as a flight instructor and by night I worked as an experiential group psychotherapist.

### *Exercise*

Having been a military officer, in a high stress occupation, physical health and fitness had been a high priority since my mid-20s. At the core of my daily exercise routine was the Royal Canadian Air Force's 5BX program developed to keep aircrew fit during long frozen winters. Now that I was in my 40s, I had to work a little harder, and with more consistency, to maintain my previous level of fitness.

I did daily walks of 3km or more and kayaked frequently in a nearby river. In my early-50's I bought a sea-kayak and started paddling in the Pacific Ocean off Sydney. In winter, I did an annual four-day backpacking trip in the Blue Mountains National Park west of Sydney.

### *Physical health*

My physical health remained good throughout my middle age with no major illnesses. I have had a tendency to mild hypertension since my mid-30s. My long-distance vision deteriorated slightly in my late-20s and has remained stable. My short distance vision has been deteriorating steadily with age since my early-40s. I remained arthritis free until my late-60s.

### *Mental health*

My level of mental health and wellbeing during middle age was high. I had achieved my dream of being a professional pilot and loved being a flight instructor. I had obtained my first university degree and had established myself in a successful career as an experiential group psychotherapist.

I was maintaining good health and an adequate level of physical fitness. I had recreational pursuits I loved. Sea-kayaking and bushwalking proved to be an effective way of maintaining wellbeing. I managed to organise and lead at least one air safari to central and northern Australia each year. This was also a great source of self-esteem and wellbeing. I continued to practice mindfulness.

At first, I had a little difficulty coping with having two very different careers active at the same time. This soon passed and the only difficulty was in the minds of my student-pilots and fellow instructors, if they found out about my group psychotherapy work.

### ***Social Atom***

I met my current partner at age 43. In this period, I had many acquaintances and few friends. I had regular contact with my children who lived 30 minutes' drive away. I also had regular contact with my family-of-origin. These contacts became more and more infrequent towards the end of the period.

### **Old age**

*In old age, life takes away more than it gives* - Indiana Jones  
in Kingdom of the Crystal Skull, 2008

At age 60, when I realised ageing was unavoidable, I made a pact with myself that I would live on the outer edge of my mental and physical capabilities as my ageing process unfolded. Of course, this pact did not eliminate the strong, ever present urge to stop struggling and take the line of least resistance.

### ***Career***

**Commercial pilot and flight instructor.** When I entered my 60s I was still working as a flight instructor and an experiential group psychotherapist. In my late-60s, I realised my professional pilot career was drawing to a close. Because of this, I decided to update my counselling and psychotherapy qualifications. I ceased working as a professional pilot at age 73.

**Postgraduate university studies.** At age 68, I started a part-time coursework Master of Counselling degree course at the University of New England (UNE), Australia. At age 70, I started a part-time research Master of Counselling with Honours degree with UNE and graduated at age 75. My research was a pilot study in the areas of group psychotherapy and psychodrama. I am currently searching for a

university able to provide supervisors for a Doctor of Philosophy course in these areas.

**Employment activities.** At age 75, I entered into a business partnership with sociometrist, and superb auxiliary, Helen Phelan to provide leadership training and consultation across a wide spectrum of applications. My current major contribution is in the area group psychotherapy training. I have also recently registered as an outreach counsellor with Relationships Australia. I am a member of the Australian Association of Social Workers Private Practice and Men's Practice Groups.

### *Exercise*

As a professional pilot, I had to maintain a high level of physical fitness. My 90-minute daily exercise routine included stretching, core muscle work with 5BX, sprinting on a rebounder, stepping on a stair machine, weights and 30 minutes on an elliptical trainer. When working at my computer, I did a few minutes on a stepper every hour and a half. This was augmented with weekly walks up and down ravines in the nearby Blue Mountains National Park carrying a 20kg backpack. In summer, fortnightly four-hour sea-kayaking trips in the Pacific Ocean were added. At age 63, I was the fittest I had been, at any age.

### *Physical health*

At age 65, I developed chronic, incurable atopic dermatosis on 80% of my body. The discomfort it causes is a significant handicap to my lifestyle. By learning to put the discomfort in the background and the rest of my life in the foreground I have managed to stay active and involved in life.

Apart from the dermatosis, my only other health issue is mild, genetically caused hypertension. I have been on a low dosage anti-hypertensive medication since age 58.

As I have aged, my susceptibility to upper respiratory tract infections (viruses) has slowly increased. My recovery time is also increasing. Skin wounds are taking slightly longer to heal.

Although my physical stamina is excellent for a man aged 76, it has been slowly decreasing since age 72. My recovery time from physical exertion has doubled since age 63.



## *Mental health*

**Reconnecting with psychodrama.** At age 67, I felt the need to connect with people who had a similar level of personal development to mine. In other words, I needed some auxiliaries. I reasoned that psychodrama practitioners and trainees would be the most likely source. I sought out Dr Max Clayton and found he was still running psychodrama training workshops, 21 years after I last saw him. I enrolled in a four-day residential workshop following which I decided to recommence my psychodrama training.

**An increasing desire to learn.** Throughout my 60s and 70s I have had an increasing desire to learn. It seems I am trying to cram in as much knowledge as possible in the time I have left. I have been assisted in this by the advent of university level podcasting in a wide variety of disciplines. I am also learning to speak French. I am hoping to continue expanding my mental abilities by undertaking postgraduate study at PhD level. A secondary purpose for this mental activity is to minimise the chance of developing senility, or Alzheimer's syndrome, due to mental inactivity.

**Limited amount of life left.** I constantly have to struggle against the awareness of having a limited amount of life left. My hedonistic side uses it as an excuse to take the line of least resistance. I counter this with the knowledge that taking the easy path has never brought me contentment.

**Perception of time.** I have also been dismayed by a change in my perception of the speed of time passing. Days, weeks and months appear to rush by at astonishing speed. Their speed seems to increase with each passing year.

**Dealing with loss of hope.** For me, the most difficult issue in dealing with ageing is loss of hope. This has resulted from my perception that I don't have a future. Up until middle age, I drew comfort from fantasising about a brighter future. Now that "future" has been largely taken out of the equation, this fantasy is harder to maintain. My postgraduate education and my employment activities are aimed at putting hope back in the equation. Frequent contact with my small group of very high quality auxiliaries also helps.

**Low income.** Loss of hope is exacerbated by low income. Throughout my life, I chose occupations I was passionate about but which were relatively low paid. As a result, I find myself trying to live a full life without sufficient funds to support it. This produces a daily inner

struggle to maintain my motivation. It would be so much easier to give in and live a smaller life rather than a larger one.

**Ageism.** Although I have experienced only one instance of ageism in seeking employment, I am constantly aware of its presence in my cultural atom. My goal is to continue demonstrating that the elderly have value. I plan to keep behaving in ways not expected of a man my age.

### ***Social Atom***

At age 62, I started giving flight instruction to Don, a 77 year-old man who had grown up in the same area of Sydney as me. Subsequently, our friendship grew until his death 11 years later. We became each other's best friend. Don had experienced great hardship during his formative years. He was a humble, generous, compassionate man who possessed great wisdom. He also had kidney failure and a malfunctioning heart valve. In spite of this, he had a passion for life, and people, which he maintained until his death. He was universally loved by all who met him.

Don taught me the benefit of having close friends rather than staying safe in my "cave". I have never felt content in my "cave" since. He made it impossible for me to complain about my ageing process. My troubles paled into insignificance beside his. Being with him was an uplifting experience.

Since age 69, I have acquired a small group of very high quality auxiliaries. They provide me with the doubling and mirroring I need to continue my personal development.

I am also greatly assisted by having a partner who is highly competent in ensuring we maintain a food lifestyle compatible with maintaining physical health. To me this is an essential factor in maintaining my ability to behave in a way not expected of a man of my age.

### **The last word**

My experience of ageing is that it is a gradual process of loss and grief that requires daily adjustment. I have a constant urge to let go and surrender to the line of least resistance. I counter this by reminding myself that a feeling of self-worth is best achieved by useful employment, a healthy eating lifestyle and daily exercise.

My goal of living at the outer edge of my capabilities is still active. I also have a sub-goal of astounding younger generations by physical and

intellectual achievements they regard as being unlikely for the elderly. I hope to set an example of what is possible in old age.

Life is not over 'til it's over. The last chapter of my life has not been written yet.

