

Sir George Trevelyan: thoughts and writings

## Retirement and Old Age

A Vision Splendid

*A Wrekin Trust Lecture*



*[Editor's note: this lecture was given in the early 1980s, when it was customary for working people to retire at around the age of 60-65, and retirement often constituted a more thorough reduction of work and involvements than became the case by the turn of the Millennium. Attitudes toward old age have also shifted in recent times, and Sir George was an early speaker on this. - PJ]*

**So you are retiring? You are facing the advance of old age, and with it the prospect of death. Splendid. This is a great stage to have reached. But it is immensely important to discuss our attitude towards these great things of life.**

It is strange to think that ours is the only period in world history in which virtually the whole of society is given a dozen free years after the career is finished or the family launched. Previously life consisted basically of nurture, training and toil until worn out. Now, through medical advance and the social services, death is postponed and like a free gift we each have this spell of time in which to harvest the life experience we have made.

Now we can leave the arena and go at a gentler pace.

It is interesting that many enter retirement with anxiety. Sometimes the transition is just too sudden. A business executive who has held great responsibility and has had a routine office life may feel as if something has snapped. The bottom seems to fall out of life. Apparently there are many who break down and even die after a couple of years of retirement. Many simply take on some other form of work so as to feel fully employed.

Basically we should accept that this is a new phase in life, a culminating experience. It is not just that our energies are less than they were and that we must rest more. It is a period with a purpose of deep significance.

Our lives fall into 7 year periods. At 7 we grow our second teeth, at 14 reach puberty, at 21 come of age, at 28 are at the top of our strength, at 42 often take on the greatest responsibility, but at the age of 63 we reach what is called the 'climacteric'. We move into the time leading to the august stage of "three score years and ten". Recognise this change at about 63 as an entry into a real new soul-period, in which we can begin to work on ourselves in a new way.

We withdraw from the activity of the arena of life. With the relaxing of the pressures of a career our activities should now take on a different emphasis. It is not by any means that we need to become idle, but rather that the emphasis must turn inward more, towards a deeper development.

T.S. Eliot put it well in 'East Coker':

*"Old men ought to be explorers.  
Here and there does not matter  
We must be still, and still moving  
Into another intensity,  
For further union, a deeper communion...  
In my end is my beginning".*

What do these enigmatic lines really mean?

Our whole attitude towards retirement and old age is conditioned, positively or negatively, by our beliefs about the meaning and purpose of life - and death.

Let me summarise the world view which is emerging so rapidly in many minds in our time. Through our materialistic culture a fine new wind is blowing which fills many people with the certainty that life is about something quite different from mere "getting and spending".

A spiritual world view is beginning to colour our thinking. A materialistic outlook is primarily one of outward looking - a concern with things and the acquiring of more of them, desires and their satisfaction.

This, of course, is important but there is an inward exploration also possible. William Blake, that great seer of the New Age, wrote "*I cease not from my great task, to open the Eternal Worlds, to open the Immortal Eye of Man, inwards, into the Worlds of Thought, into Eternity, ever expanding in the Bosom of God, the Human Imagination*".

By looking inward in the right way we can learn to look through and out into realms undreamt of in our ordinary life. Then we discover that Life is something which can never be destroyed. It is eternal and it is a great **Oneness**. There is a kernel in each of us which is imperishable. The body may break down and be destroyed but the core of man, the real individuality, is a spiritual entity which is beyond death. If this be so then it is the most important piece of knowledge we can get, particularly in a culture which tacitly assumes that death is the end and that 'we' are extinguished with the destruction of brain and sense mechanism. This is no new knowledge. In our culture we have simply forgotten it or lost the means of making it real and meaningful to ourselves. All the great cultures of the past have, broadly speaking, recognised that the core of a man is a droplet of the Divine Source and as such is imperishable.

Now in an age of anxiety and doubt, of agnosticism and cynicism, of materialism and rivalry, of atheism and indifference to the spirit, there re-emerges the ageless wisdom in a form which our modern intellects can take. And with it comes a flood of joy and reassurance, awakening a great hope for man's future even in this time when doom - laden prophecies seem to hang over a society in which death and catastrophe play so large a part. For if the 'soul' is eternal there can be no death in the sense of extinction. The worn out sheath of the body will be discarded and the liberated soul will move back to the plane from which it descended and to which it truly belongs. We begin to see that the soul is on a long allegorical journey descending from realms of light into darkness and density of matter in order to learn lessons through it's trials and ordeals that it may then rise further towards the Divinity of which it is a part.

Thus we grasp clearly that *we are not our bodies*. We, the real "we", the imperishable spiritual core, takes to itself a body as a necessary sheath so that it may live in the world of substance. We live *through* our bodies, which develop and age and must be discarded in due time. Our birth is a descent into drastic limitation. It is like a descent into a kind of tomb. Death then is a release from limitation into the wider consciousness which is the soul's true home. It is more like a birth. The important thought is that we were there as a developed entity before we were born. *Pre-existence* is a concept which must be conceived. There is much speculation about survival after death. If we can accept the postulate of the imperishable entity, then survival is axiomatic. The droplet of life cannot be extinguished. Of course we survive. It need hardly be discussed. But to get clear on the concept of pre-existence is important, for it gives us a new humility and sense of responsibility. We see that there is a long spiritual evolution for the soul. Before entering birth we were extended in consciousness in the planes of light.

Wordsworth saw this; think again those well known lines in "The Intimations of Immortality in Early Childhood"

*"Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:  
The soul that rises with us, our life's star,  
Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
And cometh from afar;  
Not in entire forgetfulness,  
And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home.*

*Heaven lies about us in our infancy;  
Shades of the prison house begin to close  
Upon the growing boy,  
But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,  
He sees it in his joy;  
The youth, who daily farther from the east*

*Must travel, still is Nature's priest,  
And by the vision splendid  
Is on his way attended;  
At length the man perceives it die away,  
And fade into the light of common day".*

As he aged Wordsworth lost the earlier vision.

In our time the task for the senior citizen is to reawaken the "vision splendid" and advance towards the ultimate release with ever mounting anticipation, hope and joy.

When you see a wee child don't say "Look at that tiny little soul". It may be a great and developed soul beginning to enter a tiny puling frame. It will take its 21 years fully to incarnate, to come of age.

When you see an old man, don't say "Look at that poor old soul". It is an ageless soul suffering from the limitations of an ageing body. The soul is a thing of eternal youth moving between expansion on the higher planes and experience of limitation within a body. The last years should be a progressive release from identification with the body, just as the first years were a progressive entry.

You see how this spiritual world view must colour our attitude to our years of retirement and ageing. The soul is being prepared for a great release. At the height of its physical powers and in the full glory of its senses it has closely identified itself with substance. Now with the body's power failing it should turn, not with reluctance but with the joy of understanding, towards the great task of preparation for its release.

The task of man on earth is to build his permanent spiritual individuality. For this we are here. We carry with us into the life beyond only that which we have spiritualised of our faculties and thinking. That which is solely concerned with mundane affairs will fade. Alas that so many who have not realised that consciousness goes on, make no preparation whatever. It is as if they were to enter a higher university without even taking one O-level examination.

For those whose minds are open and flexible there is now an overwhelming body of evidence to prove survival and pre-existence. The critical intellect may always try to debunk and disbelieve. We now recognise that the mind can apprehend truth directly and does not need "scientific" proof in a field where weighing and measuring is impossible. There is no space in this essay to go deeply into the picture of the life beyond given us through communication and communion with those who have passed on. A number of important book titles are appended. Be it said here that there is no attempt in what I have written to enforce belief. Rather it is an invitation to *think*. If the outlook attracts you, think it; hold it as a view of life

and if it is true it will attract other thoughts, and strengthen you in your whole attitude of courage in facing 'the future'.

A new quality of communion with our friends on the higher planes is now becoming possible. Remarkable truths were found by trance mediums of integrity. Now more and more sensitives are finding it possible in fullest consciousness to commune with 'departed' friends. The messages bring a certainty that we are very close to those we love, for we are on the same telepathic wave length. Rather than appearing before us they can speak within our thinking, blending with our own consciousness. Thus we shall appear to give ourselves the answer to our own questions which we send up to them. It is a marvellously intimate form of communion, far subtler than bodily contact. The soul which has moved on is in a subtler body. The communications show that we remain very much ourselves but in a surrounding shaped much more easily by our thought and imagination, since we are freed from the restrictions of dense matter.

The very word 'death' is loaded with the sense of finality and the horror of the rotting cadaver. There is no word in our language to connote the splendour of the release of the soul from the restricting body, an expansion into light.

Thus the new understanding will alter our whole attitude to ageing. Of course the body develops its pains and troubles. We must see it in proportion. What is ten or fifteen years out of eternity? The soul is beginning to free itself from a body which has served its turn. This can be uncomfortable, but there should be ample compensation as the mind and soul attain a deeper tranquillity and joy in recognising the true goal.

The only tragedy is when a person gets enclosed within the aches and pains and fails to gain the 'vision splendid'.

We are not, in our closing years, simply putting time by until we 'rest in the grave'. We are called on to prepare for a great step forward, opening possibilities of wider exploration and holding fascinating prospects. We shall be reunited with those we love. We shall have the opportunity for a full and creative life on a different and wider plane of consciousness, and yet it is clear that essentially we still remain surprisingly ourselves.

One can envisage a new kind of nursing home receiving those who are soon to pass on, but helping them to face the light-filled Gates of Death with joy and courage. We should go through in conscious joy and with the conviction that we shall be received by friends in a world of light. The closing months of life could be something of a ritual preparation, so that the mind can understand what is happening.

We have to feel that as senior citizens we are in a true sense beginning to build a new form of society. There will, obviously, be infinitely varied interests for

individuals to follow. What matters is that some part of the day is given over to the development of the inner life, in meditation study of books on the spiritual path, or creative activities. All this clearly will vary according to the soul development of the person concerned. It is the attitude of mind that matters, in recognising that this is a preparatory period rather than a winding up of life. You can still build faculties and skills which will carry over into the wide reaches of the beyond. You can lift thinking on to a subtler level, less concerned with the world of the senses. Indeed you can develop the subtler inner senses which link you with the 'supersensible' worlds.

Yeats, in his poem "Sailing to Byzantium", gives us a grand image of ageing:

*"An aged man is but a paltry thing  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing,  
For every tatter in its mortal dress,  
Nor is there singing school but studying  
Monuments of its own magnificence;  
And therefore have I sailed the seas and come  
To the holy city of Byzantium"*

To Yeats Byzantium was not only a beautiful city but also symbolised a higher state of consciousness. We are truly concerned with adult education to which there is literally no end.

From the concept of the eternal nature of the soul and the infinite importance of life on earth as a training ground, it logically follows that we must have visited this earth many times. Otherwise, soul evolution would seem impossible. One life is clearly not long enough for much development. Thus the postulate of re-incarnation makes sense to many people and restores meaning to life. There is no obligation to accept it, but if we learn to live with it as a thought its probable truth is borne in upon us.

Recognise that life in a body is a drastic limitation of the soul. We take over a body and learn to work with it. It is the necessary implement for a free ranging spirit to be slowed down in vibratory rate and so to act effectively in the material plane. The senses really should be seen as filters which allow only a little of the splendour of the Cosmos into our consciousness. Here is another short poem by Martin Armstrong which he calls.....

"The Cage"

*"Man, afraid to be alive  
Shuts his soul in senses five  
From fields of uncreated light  
Into the crystal tower of sight,  
And from the roaring songs of space*

*Into the small flesh carven place  
Of the ear whose cave impounds  
Only small and broken sounds,  
And to his narrow sense of touch  
From strength that held the stars in clutch,  
And from the warm ambrosial spice  
Of flowers and fruits of paradise,  
Into the frail and fitful power  
Of scent and tasting sweet and sour;  
And toiling for a sordid wage  
There in his self created cage  
Ah, how safely barred is he  
From menace of Eternity"*

The essence of earth life is not only limitation but loss. We must learn to forego. Our lives of course are filled with the experience of loss, disappointments, sacrifice of hopes. But now know that on the higher plane we shall find again those we have loved and lost. The loss is all a training of the soul. Do you remember Samuel Butler's delightful *mis*-quotation - "*It is better to have loved and lost than never to have lost at all!*"! Furthermore, on the higher planes, it appears that we get the opportunity to fulfil the things we had hoped to do and achieve. Frustration on earth can lead to fulfilment in higher worlds. Our task here is to accept the loss and transmute the unfulfilled longing into aspiration. By the loss we learn where our real love lies and can set the heart to aspiration and anticipation of fulfilment on another level. "*All which thy child's mistake, fancies as lost I have stored for thee at home: Rise, clasp My hand and come!*"! So speaks the Christ Being in Frances Thompson's "Hound of Heaven".

Yet now at the close of this essay let us recognise that all is not simply a selfish desire for the 'saving of our soul'. Old age has a function in the very redemption of mankind. We live in an age of spiritual awakening. A New Age is coming in which the power of the spirit becomes apparent working through every aspect of life. The veils between the planes of consciousness are thinning. A new society begins to form, fired by a new ardour and a love which transcends the personal and unites with the Divinity in all things. The younger generation, very many of them, sense what is happening. Hence their 'rebellion' in a quest of new ways to widen consciousness. They know that great changes must come and that much that works on the old laws must be swept away, but that the New is filled with the Living Spirit. There never was such an Age to be alive. But we know there is no death. We are always 'alive' on this plane or that. If we are old we are not 'out of the game'. In spirit we are eternally young. It matters little whether we are working from earth bodies or on the higher spheres. The river of death turns out to be a trickle and we shall still be in touch when we have gone over. Thus those of us who are shortly to be released from ageing bodies may still take part in the great changes. By understanding the stupendous spiritual picture of the birth of a New Age, the age of Aquarius and of the Holy Spirit, the older people are helping

to lift the whole body of consciousness towards the light. Go forward into the light with joy that we are all involved. Discover the timeless ageless being within you and rejoice. "Not farewell, but fare-forward, voyagers".

## **BOOK TITLES**

"Testimony of Light" Helen Greaves  
"Post Mortem Journal" Jane Sherwood  
"The Supreme Adventure" R. Crookall  
"Survival of Death" Paul Beard  
"Beyond the Horizon" Grace Rosher  
"Traveller's Return" Grace Rosher  
"Beyond Human Personality" Geraldine Cummings  
"Private Dowding" W. Tudor Pole  
"Sunrise": A Book of Comfort for the Bereaved: Grace Cooke

"Swan in the Evening" Rosamond Lehmann  
"Into the Everywhere" Alice Gilbert  
"Philip in the Spheres" Alice Gilbert  
"Letters from Our Daughters" Cynthia Sandys )  
"Through the Gates of Death" Dion Fortune  
"Life in the World Unseen" Anthony Borgia