

Lust For Life, by Liz McManus

Lust for Life... Age & Opportunity's choice of a theme for the Bealtaine festival 2024 – 2027 reflects a familiar experience for many older people.

Often, with age, a new lust for life blossoms. The crime writer, Agatha Christie, has written about this phenomenon. '[After midlife] *one's thankfulness for the gift of life is, I think stronger and more vital during those years than it has ever been before. It has some of the reality and intensity of dreams.*'

Small things may matter more but that doesn't stop us asking big questions. There is a consciousness that we are blessed to wake up in the morning and to be able to get out of bed. Each day, we know, could be our last. That realization gives life its piquancy and a new vitality. Yes, of course, our joints creak, our eyes and ears don't work like they used to, our teeth crumble and we ache in the places where we used to play, as Leonard Cohen helpfully points out, but there are compensations.

When I retired, I discovered that being old is like being young again, only this time, it is better, because there are no parents telling you what to do. We are on our own. It is up to each one of us to answer the poet Mary Oliver's famous question: '*Tell me what do you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*'

'I try to get up and be productive and don't let the old man in' Clint Eastwood answered when asked why he keeps on making films. He is 93 years old and has recently completed directing his latest film, *Juror #1*. And there is no indication that he intends to retire. I don't know how he finds the energy. Being a Hollywood star helps, I imagine. Even so, I do think that he is a good role model for older people. I've decided to adopt his philosophy. *Don't let the old*

lady in ... yes, I like the air of defiance implicit in Eastwood's words even if I'm only trailing behind him in age.

I like too, the way his maxim encapsulates the challenge we face when we confront the truth of our mortality. Whether we like it or not, we have a limited amount of time left. The question is: how will we spend that time?

These days, there is no shortage of advice on the subject. Newspaper articles and television programmes bombard us with instructions to take exercise, get enough sleep, eat well, give up smoking, drink in moderation and keep stress at bay. Hence we now see armies of greyheads tramping across the Wicklow mountains, or emptying the pubs; these are the places that used to depend on the trade of old men nursing pints at the bar in an effort to keep warm as well as keeping loneliness at bay.

Even healthy living will be the death of us, sooner or later, but preferably, - we like to think - later. However, I was taken aback recently to read about research on ageing carried out in the US which showed how limited our influence on health outcomes can be. According to the research, environment, lifestyle and genetics make up approximately half of the factors that determine longevity. The other half is unknown. It is down, apparently, to luck.

Of course, we can't always choose how we will live. Ill-health, poverty, depression, a sense of loss, have a habit of accumulating with age. Many of us are caring for someone else. In that case, important questions arise:

'Who cares for the carer? Am I leaving enough time for myself?'

Sometimes, the enormity of our unhappiness can be overwhelming. At one time

in my life, in my late fifties, I was so distressed that I decided to see a therapist. That decision led to a turning point in my life.

He: What are you afraid of?

Me: I'm afraid of the future.

He: Instead of being afraid of the future why don't you try experimenting with it?

And so I did. I went on group walking holidays to the Atlas Mountains and to Ladakh in the Indian Himalayas. I drank a pint in the community centre cum pub on Inishturk off the Mayo coast. In 2011, I retired from work and became a student at Trinity College Dublin. Unexpectedly, I met a man and fell in love. We are still together, getting older and more decrepit, but we manage to knock a bit of fun out of life. At our age, having fun is a serious business. A friend of mine maintains that we oldies have a duty to have fun, in order to give good example to the young ones coming after us.

There is another gift, that we can leave behind us. I often ask older people the question: 'Why not write the story of your life for those who come after you?' It doesn't matter how well or badly we write it. What matters is that we provide a way for future generations to discover their own history.

In all the research I have read about ageing, one theme is constant: social engagement helps us to age well. We benefit from the company of family, friends, bridge clubs, volunteering groups and all the other organisations designed to keep us busy and creative.

In particular, like many others of my generation, I have found that being a grandparent enriches my life. Grandchildren, it is said, give us a second chance to do things better because they bring out the best in us. I never knew my own

grandparents and yet, in my seventies, I found a way, by writing a novel about them and the turbulent times they lived through. The novel's title is *When Things Come to Light* because, for me, human experience is a continuous revelation. We never know how our story is going to end.

Until that story ends, whatever our circumstances, there is always a choice to be made and, in a way, there's no choice: we have to keep going. The joy of living is that, when we go out to meet the world, the world, in all its natural beauty and human compassion, comes to meet us: our *lust for life* illuminates the reality that none of us is alone. So the last question I pose is this:

‘When we go out to meet the world, do we give, or do we take, or a combination of both?’

Liz McManus, January 2024