

Living in an ageing community

We had just moved in to our new home. I had begun to dig a trench to plant day lillies and bulbs that I had brought from the farm, when a groundsman walked past and offered a hand. In a trice, he had dug an eight metre long trench in the heavy clay soil. This was so different from my KV garden, where I did such heavy work myself without question. Then an Irish gentleman passed by. He welcomed me but, unlike the greeting of so many others, he said " This is the beginning of the end, you know". I would have preferred "the beginning of your golden years", but I had to admit that he had a point and I often think of his words.

We have now lived here for over two years. In that time, nine of the residents have died. We have all watched women lose their life partners and, in one case, a man his wife. Several people have dementia, some Parkinsons disease and other chronic illnesses. But here this is neither unexpected nor shocking. It is evidence of what we all face, one way or another, within the next 20 or 30 years. Enough here have already experienced bereavement and all that it entails, to demonstrate that they have survived and are enjoying life to the full, in spite of their loss. Their robustness is admirable. It leads many of us to an acceptance of our eventual fate with less fear than we would otherwise have.

There is a level of understanding and support, both implicit and explicit, that is tangible. For those with partners with developing dementia, there is always someone to confide in who has lived this journey. I have noticed that the men are sensitive to those who are confused and tend to guide and jolly them along, in a blokey, effortless manner. These guys are true gentlemen. For those facing knee or hip replacements, there are prior examples of others who have completed rehabilitation and now have a new lease on life. Soup and casseroles are forthcoming when most needed. Funeral services are swelled by the village residents and when necessary, wakes hosted by the Social Committee in our community centre.

There is a strong dividing line between an independent-living retirement village such as ours, and a nursing home where all residents are dependent on nursing care. One has an aura of sickness and death, the other an atmosphere of freedom and camaraderie. The two are so often confused in peoples' minds, including mine when a few years ago I was so shocked when a friend, the same age as me, moved to a retirement village and loved it. I could not understand how someone as young as she could do such a thing. Our kids are no better, teasing us about the "old fogies' home". I think that our common stage of life both educates us about and insulates us from the "ageism", and denial and embarrassment around death, that is obvious in the broader Australian society. It certainly does not prevent us from enjoying a vibrant and varied life style in a great environment.

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