

Age Shall Not Weary Them

By Gethin Russell-Jones

I'm 55 this year. Not really a cause for jubilation on my part; growing older is probably a source of misery for most people. Mind you, I remember a time when 21 seemed ancient and 30 was associated with moribund ageing. I can barely remember my first-and-twentieth birthday, although I am assured it most certainly happened.

Ageing is an inevitable aspect of life. It's a process which affects all existence. And as far as I am aware, there has never been a species which rejuvenates instead of deteriorating.

The only exception I can think of is entirely fictional.

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button was originally a short story penned by F. Scott Fitzgerald and later in 2008, an award-winning film starring Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett. It's the story of a man who is born with the body of a seventy-year-old and gets progressively younger as the years go by. But if you think that Mr Button enjoys an unending state of eternal youth, then you will

be disappointed. Sadly he dies of old age as an infant with dementia. Truly the stuff of nightmares.

Living Longer

However, even though we are ageing, it seems that globally we are living longer lives. Here are some figures from the United States. In 1925 average life expectancy was 59. In 1955, thanks to new vaccinations, this rose steeply to 70 years of age. Then in 1985, after a series of successful public health campaigns about the dangers of smoking and obesity, the median age climbed to 75. Today that age has risen to 79, thanks to better drugs and early diagnosis. Who knows what that number may be in another generation's time? Anecdotally many people are predicting that the children being born in the western hemisphere today may experience 100 years as an average age.

Even as I write this article, two news stories have today attracted considerable attention. One concerns Peggy Seeger, a well-known American folk singer whose career spans five decades. She is currently in her 80th year and touring. She's thinking about retiring although she's not sure when that will be. The other features Mieko Nagaoka, a 100-year-old Japanese woman who has become the first centenarian to complete a 1,500m freestyle swim in a 25m pool. She only started swimming at the age of 82,

and she intends competing until she is 105!

Thus it comes as no surprise that the study and science of ageing is gathering pace and making some remarkable discoveries. Scientists at the University of Texas Health Science Centre are experimenting on a compound called Rapamycin. It's being used on mice, whose average life span is 2.3 years. To be specific, Rapamycin is being used on Mouse UT2598. Compared to its fellow rodents, the intervention of this compound means that this attractively named animal could well live beyond four years. That may not sound like a great deal, but translating that to human years would result in a leap from the current average of about 80 years to 100. Rapamycin could be a game changer.

Other ground-breaking research is looking at the impact of 'telomeres' on shortening life. Even though it sounds like a type of seafood, we all have these deep in our bodies. Telomeres are part of our genetic makeup in a way I can't even begin to understand. Each time a cell divides, the telomeres send a signal that the process is over and leave a signature dash. Ageing makes these dashes shorter, although another enzyme called 'telomerase' compensates by making them a bit longer again. However, for people suffering with immune disorders, telomerase apparently doesn't kick in. It is hoped that if this lack can be corrected in those suffering with key disorders, then not only will it help them, but it could delay ageing in everyone.

Mindfulness an Antidote?

A recent edition of *Time* magazine contained a series of articles on the science of ageing. I was mesmerised



Peggy Seeger and Marcy Marxer, *Girls with Guitars*

by one topic in particular. Namely the impact of meditation on reducing stress and inflammation. Now this is important since stress and inflammation are no friends of the ageing process. Here's a quote from *Time* journalist, Jeffrey Kluger.

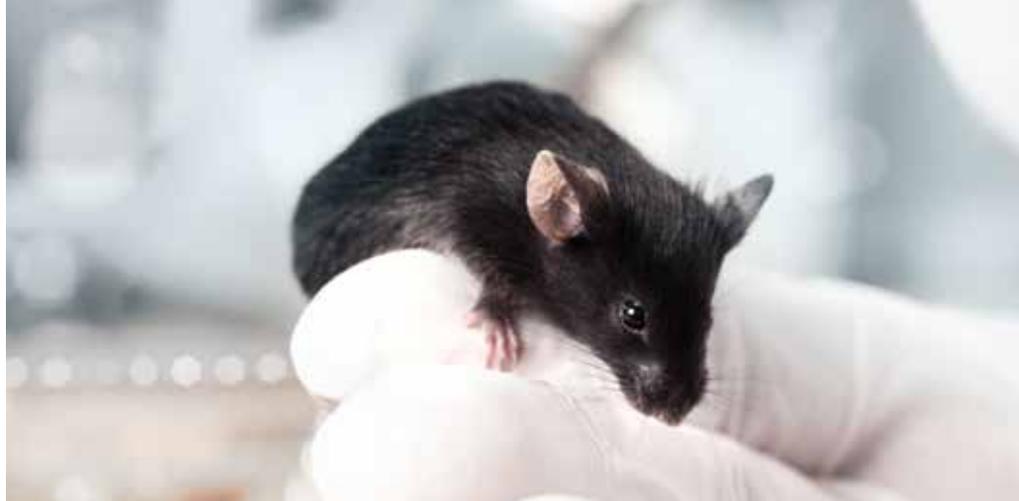
Consider one study, for instance, showing that even a single day of a mindfulness meditation practice can down-regulate a gene that codes for inflammation—one of the greatest drivers for ageing. Or the one showing that reducing stress can reduce the cellular damage from the highly reactive oxygen atoms known as free radicals. Or the research that found, most remarkably, that the telomeres within your cells, the little cuffs that cap chromosomes and erode your lifespan, can actually be made to grow longer, provided your mind is in the right state to make it happen.¹

Now these are not flaky ideas but serious research in receipt of millions of dollars of public funding. And the same issues are being raised in the UK as well. Happiness and wellbeing have become government backed initiatives, telling us that a happy life often involves exercise, de-stressing, and prayer. For example, the National Health Service website, www.nhs.uk, includes tips on how to reduce stress by including what it calls 'mindfulness' in our daily lives. The site quotes Mark Williams, Professor of Clinical Psychology at the Oxford Mindfulness Centre.

He says:

Mindfulness can be an antidote to the 'tunnel vision' that can develop in our daily lives, especially when we are busy, stressed, or tired.

It's easy to stop noticing the world around us. It's also easy to lose touch with the way our bodies are feeling and to end up living 'in our heads'—caught up in our thoughts without stopping to notice how those thoughts are driving our emotions and behaviour.



The intervention of Rapamycin on Mouse UT2598 means that this attractively named animal could well live beyond four years, unlike its fellow rodents.

An important part of mindfulness is reconnecting with our bodies and the sensations they experience. This means waking up to the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of the present moment. That might be something as simple as the feel of a banister as we walk upstairs.

Another important part of mindfulness is an awareness of our thoughts and feelings as they happen moment to moment. Awareness of this kind doesn't start by trying to change or fix anything. It's about allowing ourselves to see the present moment clearly. When we do that, it can positively change the way we see ourselves and our lives.

Studies have found that mindfulness programmes, where participants are taught mindfulness practices across a series of weeks, can bring about reductions in stress and improvements in mood.²

Living in the Moment

Particularly intriguing is the connection between physical and mental health. Advocates of positive thinking have argued that you can think your way out of dark times by the power of optimism, reprogramming your mindset. But mindfulness is different. It is based in living in the moment, accepting your feelings and reactions without analysing them or trying to change them, simply being present to

yourself and the world now, without worrying about what may happen next.

And it all reminds me of Jesus' words:

Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.³

Millennia before research into ageing, stress, and mental health, Jesus seems to have captured it all. Essentially, he argues that the good life is lived in the present in utter dependence on God. Anxious neither for the future or regretting the past, rather treating each moment as a sacramental gift to be experienced.

I think he might have been on to something.

Notes

¹ *Time*, February 23 – March 2, 2015

² www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/pages/mindfulness.aspx

³ *Matthew* 6.31–34

Gethin Russell-Jones writes from Wales. This article was first published in *The Plain Truth*, Spring 2015. Reprinted with permission.