

Silver threads among the gold

Bob Forster

JUST THREE DAYS before Christmas I had a birthday. Yes, another one. They seem to be getting closer together. It was ironic that I recently unearthed a lapel badge proclaiming 'Naughty 40'. Wishful thinking. A badge that old should have been coated in rust, not just in nostalgia. The next decade was far closer. Half a century? – no wonder my parents are looking grey.

Maybe what prompted these thoughts of gathering antiquity was frustration. Frustration at not being able to run for the past six months, having been written off by the specialist. From an average of ten miles running a day since my late teens, my exertion now is limited to that needed to fasten the top button around my bulging neck. Yet back in the spring I ran two marathons within a three week period. That was the old buffer's downfall. Having almost drowned in the deluge at the London Marathon I couldn't resist the lure of the White Peak race, twenty six and a quarter miles of bliss on a glorious morning along former railway embankments high amongst the limestone hills. If that turns out to be my last race it will be wreathed in good memories.

But that was it. Two weeks later, a knee and stomach injury had not improved. Maybe 'injury' is the wrong word. According to my wife, the knee was overuse, the stomach overeating. Whatever you call it, I can't run. Well, not properly. Over Christmas I had four days of running, each one a two mile jog around the village.

The last one, on Christmas Day, came after the normal lunchtime excess. It nearly wasn't just my knees that came up a treat. Running is probably the cruelest sport for highlighting geriatric tendencies. The ageing footballer may misplace his dribble, the cricketer loses his zip and the golfer nods off on the nineteenth green, but the runner can measure his has-beens to the second in a sport where the stopwatch rules. Race distances remain the same but times slow up in an inevitably declining curve. Marathons were once run in two and a half hours; now even three hours seems beyond me. The heart still beats strongly and the lungs' heaving is only marginally closer to a wheeze, but two new legs are needed or, at least, a new knee and a rejuvenated stomach. Sad man.

This morbid fascination with sporting decline is not, however, the whole story. Whilst lack of running is a disappointment, the whole process of getting older is, so far at least, one of interest, not disappointment. Cheerfulness is inbred, unrelated to age. All being well, I'll retain my positive and smiling nature until somebody gently pulls my eyelids down. And until then, I'll continue to see the evidence of youth's departure as further steps through life, not as a spectral trudge towards eternity. Besides, as a Christian, death holds no fears, just expectations.

So between the youthfulness of sport and the perceived pathos of death, noting the changes is a source of interest, not disappointment.

Readers in my age bracket may relate to some of these changes; others may either look forward to the symptoms of gentle erosion or look back wistfully.

Increasingly, colleagues and friends are talking enthusiastically about retirement. I've only been working for 25 years, although teaching has aged me disproportionately, and I love my job, but gradually there's talk about pension entitlement and retirement workshops. Mike was only a couple of years ahead of me at college but this summer he's retiring. No ill health, no job traumas - he's just going. However, his job combination of maths teacher and school chaplain is enough to make anyone throw in the towel. Then there's eyesight. For years I've secretly rejoiced over being the sole member of my family who doesn't need glasses, but now I'm not so sure.

Just a fortnight ago I sat next to a friend of comparable vintage at a Bible fellowship evening. As we found the correct page in our respective Bibles, we slowly and imperceptibly lengthened our arms and retreated our heads. Not a bizarre religious practice but a search for focus. Glancing sideways, we smiled sheepishly at one another, recognizing the signs. Sadly for the children at our school, the eyes in the back of my head seem as sharp as ever. I remember my parents' silver wedding anniversary, a milestone of matrimonial collusion. Such anniversaries were for the older ones, the mature generations, the ones beyond even the second flush of youth.

That was then and we were us. Yet last summer was our silver anniversary. We kept it very quiet. We don't like parties - at least that was our excuse. Maybe, though, there were other reasons, not unrelated to our refusal to accept mellow reality. And later on this summer it will be my parents' golden wedding; will we be allowed in without a stick and a bus pass?

Events of earlier days also do much to heighten the awareness of age gaps. Songs once hummed incessantly, have all but disappeared, yet to me they are as real as they ever were. Two hundred lusty throats joined with me in the junior singing practice recently, belting out an old sixties favourite called 'Winchester Cathedral'. At the end, in came the rest of the teachers.

"Did you enjoy hearing that again?" I asked.

The teachers looked blank. I looked crestfallen. Wrong generation, you see. Particularly galling when it's your colleagues, your equals, who cause your crest to fall.

Years are passing by. I'm changing. Not so much falling apart but definitely one or two hairline cracks are appearing in the libido. There's no bitterness and little nostalgia. *Que sera, sera*. I have few regrets simply because life has been, and continues to be, very good to me. A smile, a positive attitude and an optimistic nature should always overcome the supposed and often imagined drawbacks of age. As a whimsical nun's prayer says, "A sour old person is one of the crowning works of the devil"; that I will avoid at all costs.