

Age and attitude

My parents married during the Second World War. Both my grandmothers were present on that bleak winter's day in Melbourne, and I have a photograph of them looking old. The weather and the fashions of the time did not help, but they looked much older than 48 and 58. They had been born in the decade from 1885-95, however, and women born then could expect to live to be 51, men to be only 47.

Both grandmothers and my grandfather lived longer than average. Attitudes towards ageing and the circumstances of older members of our society have generally changed over the decades, and not always for the better. And most white Australians these days expect to see 80.

Writer Thomas Keneally, himself 84, recently expressed his approval of the Shakespearian metaphor: 'all the world's a stage'. But he could not cope, he said, with the popular and prevailing idea that 'all the world's a market', a notion that connects retirement with a new lack of productivity, and so something of an 'extra' that the rest of society has to handle. This attitude surfaces in some quarters with particular significance during this period of coronavirus.

Captain Tom Moore might be interested in this point of view: he is the Englishman who started a sponsored walk in his garden as a fund-raising project in the month before his 100th birthday, an effort that culminated in the raising of 32 million pounds for Britain's National Health Service.

In his regular reports to the nation in Greece the Health Ministry's chief spokesperson did not accept that 'useful' position in regard to ageing. Professor Tsiodras, an expert on infectious diseases, and a religious, deeply humane man, became quite emotional during one telecast. He pointed out that our identity depends on our parents and our grandparents.

As such, I think it is not only our duty to look after the aged, but a task that brings its own great rewards in the form of companionship, expressed wisdom, and guidance as to how to manage life's testing times. I have always had friends decades older than I, and those friendships have been a privilege.

Different cultures have different attitudes. Italy is the European nation with the largest proportion of people aged over 65 in its population: 22.75 per cent (2018). Portugal and Greece follow with just on 22 per cent. Compare these figures with Australia's of the same year: 15.66 per cent. In Mediterranean countries, where three-generation households are still common, grandparents, usually held in high esteem, help support the family in all sorts of ways, from child-minding to home maintenance and cooking, which frees parents to be more effective earners of much-needed cash. Grandparents also play a vital role in transmitting the culture. As mine

did: it is no exaggeration to say that I think of them and their wisdom on most days, and it is now one of my pleasures to tell my Greek grandchildren about their Australian great-great-grandparents.

And the old remain good at finding solutions to problems. Just before the lockdown started, a friend of my son's drove to his parents' village north of Athens. Both parents are well into their 70s, so son explained carefully what they could and couldn't do. They still lead traditional lives, are largely self-sufficient, but have given up keeping animals. 'No visiting, socialising, or church,' said Panos, 'and no popping along to the supermarket.'

'Just a minute,' queried Baba, 'I take all my pills with milk, so I have to go to the supermarket.'

'Absolutely not,' came the reply. 'You're going to have to take your pills with water or black tea, whatever.' And Panos left.

A week or so later, he thought he'd better check on the situation. So he rang up. Mama answered the phone. 'How's everything?'

'Everything's fine, and Baba is still taking his pills with milk.'

The reaction from Panos was apparently loud and predictable. 'What did I say about **not** going to the supermarket?'

'Calm down,' said Mama. 'We don't go to the supermarket. We've bought a goat.'

Edited from [Gillian Bouras](#): an expatriate Australian writer who has written several books, stories and articles, many of them dealing with her experiences as an Australian woman in Greece.