

Ageing

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I know I said I would not write today, but I was wrong. I write because I am. There is no more to it than that. And having decided that this afternoon looks a better bet for a walk, I have taken myself off for a coffee and to think.

I did not intend to think about age, but I did.

I read an FT article this morning that suggested that ageing does not reduce a person's productivity, although it might reduce their strength, hearing and eyesight. Older people simply have skills to compensate.

A chat with my barrista this morning on the relative virtues of age suggested he thought he was employed for his physical fitness rather than any other skill he had to offer, as if to confirm that.

And conversations I have had over the last week or so have come to mind.

One relates to a decision that I have made to retire. Not, I stress, from writing, or thinking about the issues I address here and in my more academic work. Instead, I have decided that when the last remaining tax investigation case I have running comes to a close (as it must after being in progress for more than five years, so far, due largely to Covid interruptions) it will be time to give up my practicing certificate as a chartered accountant after having it for almost forty years.

That's largely because I have decided it is time to concentrate on what I really want to do - and I've done enough practical tax now.

But this decision also recognises that, as my wife pointed out, I really don't need to keep my hand in as an accountant now just in case funding as a researcher / campaigner runs out: I would probably retire instead if that happened now. The backstop is no longer needed.

And then there is my realisation that whilst I will, of course, maintain my ICAEW membership (not least so that I can continue to look at its accounts) I am now old

enough to say that I have done that stage of my career, and to let go of it without any sense of regret.

That said, I am intrigued by my own decision. I remember the effort and stress that becoming a chartered accountant involved. I also remember all too well the experience of going out on my own to set up a firm - which I had always known that I would do when I was training. That licence to practice meant a great deal to me.

For some it can be a licence to make money. And let's not be dishonest about this: like all professional institutes the ICAEW is akin to an old-fashioned guild, existing to supposedly uphold standards, no doubt, but to also create a differential between its members and the rest of society that lets them charge more for their services. It's a privilege that can be, and I think has been, abused.

For me that licence to practice was, however more about freedom. It let me do what I wanted, for whom I wanted, in the way I wanted, with people I wanted to work with. As a definition of a freedom that I enjoyed from the age of 26 onwards I think that takes some beating.

But with age freedom takes different forms. I now value the health I once took for granted. I am now very aware that I have lived for ten years longer than my mother did, and the odd niggle (and long Covid, now thankfully seemingly gone) apart enjoy good health.

Freedom also comes from something else now. I realise that I am finite. Of course I knew that in an actuarial sense when I was young, but in reality I refused to consider that fact. The young must live as if they will go on forever. Now I simply recognise that there are only so many more years in which I can continue to do what I want.

For some that might promote thinking ability that horrible phrase, 'the bucket list'. I am not convinced by such thinking. There is no long list of regrets for things not done that I now wish to cram in. I instead want to enjoy what I have discovered gives greatest pleasure in life a little more, and maybe get better still at some of them.

I have not yet written the perfect sentence. I probably never will. But I will not give up trying to express my ideas as best as I am able. Meantime, the writing of others gives me more pleasure.

My awareness of nature is growing.

My appreciation of history is increasing.

I am a better modeller now than I have ever been: experience really does help in some hobbies.

And my appreciation of the importance of anger has not diminished.

Anger is much maligned, I think. We are now told to deny it. Anger management courses abound. And I understand why when anger is an excuse for abuse. But real anger is not abusive. It is adaptive. It is a signal that not all is right. It makes a demand on us to change. The day I cease to be angry about the abuse a few impose on the many in our society is the day that I might as well give up, because then there will be nothing left to live for. That's because I think that change is the only thing that is certain during life, and pushing that process of change in the direction that we want is the one real chance we have to change the fortunes of those we care for in life.

Age has also taught me the importance of caring. That, and the fact that you really do never stop worrying about your children.

What has all this to do with this blog? Indirectly, it has quite a lot to do with it. Another conversation in the last week was with a friend who suggested it was time for me to make a change of direction, for which they thought I was ready. They are right in the sense that I am willing to move on from the hassle of things like being a practicing chartered accountant. The admin of that is something I will not miss. But I would miss writing this blog. It keeps me sane. I can contemplate change with age, but not ones that would leave me worse off in the real, non-financial, meaning of that term.

Now, it might be time to think about that walk.