



A Season of Happiness

Focus



F14



Out of Mothballs

Oldies putting retirement on hold to care for the grandchildren

The caring of offspring is a traditionally accepted role in the animal kingdom. Snakes seem to be the exception, the little ones slithering from the nest immediately they break out of the shell - most likely because, if they don't, their parents will literally have them for breakfast! Birds, on the other hand - or should it be claw? - quite often share the minding and education of their young, although with the emu, this chore is left solely to the old man. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that he can't fly, or he's just slow on the uptake, not realising he's stuck with the brood until Mum nicks off in search of more wild oats. The lion, of course, has his pride, yet he doesn't seem to worry about looking after the kids while his many wives do the hunting. As a reward, he gets to eat first, so it's probably a fair trade. When it comes to whales, being more intelligent than most creatures, they have established a better system. The youngsters in the pod are turned over to Grandma who is older, wiser and certainly well-qualified for the job. In nature, the survival of the species is paramount, and whether the skills to achieve this are instinctive or learned, the care and upbringing of the young is pre-ordained as far as who gets the short straw.

And so to the human race. People are all pretty much the same, biologically speaking, but cultural influences can cause the designated roles of individuals to vary greatly from one society to another. Mothers always used to be first in line to look after the home and the children, until Western civilisations gradually came to terms with the fact that women can not only contribute in the workforce, but are sometimes more of an asset than mere males. Enter Mister Mom, the stay-at-home dad who, sixty years ago wouldn't have been seen dead in the laundry, unless he was fixing the washing machine. Now he cleans, cooks, feeds the little one and takes the older kids to and from school. Although the parents have switched jobs, the new system still means one of them is able to provide that element so essential to a child's early development - a caring adult who is there whenever needed, no matter what. Unfortunately, the ideal isn't always possible. As financial pressures increase, the single-income family is becoming an impractical thing of the past; and when both parents have to work, the welfare of their children can take a nose-dive.

There are, of course, kindergartens and child-care centres to fill some of the gap, and mixing with other children does help infants improve certain social skills; but, whereas those in charge of these convenient institutions are generally well-suited surrogates, they are only part-time and no substitute for the presence and guidance of a family member. Fortunately, there are alternatives - aunts and uncles and, of course, good ol' Grandma and Granddad. It used to be that these ancient relics were just a standby when having a night out with friends, someone with a vested interest to baby-sit for a few hours. Then there might be the odd day of relative freedom for parents who could farm out the ankle-biters to Nan and Pop. For the seniors it might have sounded okay in theory, a pleasant trip to the beach or the park, playing games and reliving some of their own youth. The wake-up call came at the end of the day, by which time

the olds would have been dead on their feet and glad to hand the grand-children back. Their role as temporary minders has been around for as long as grey hair, and bouncing the little lad or lass on their knee was just an occasional treat for most grandparents; but the times they are a-changing. Today, more than ever before, true retirement has gone by the board as many of these ageing redoubtables are hauled off their rocking chairs to be enlisted as the parents that kids get when their proper ones are off somewhere else. Past their prime maybe, but they are back in the thick of it, probably doing the most important job of their lives.

Exactly what part they are expected to play and how involved they become depends on circumstances not necessarily of their own making. The sudden demise of one or both parents is not unheard of, and ill-health puts such a strain on family relationships that minding children is an extra burden that only makes matters worse. In these cases, the children are left wanting, a situation few grandparents would turn their backs on. Then there are the wayward kids, those who, for whatever reason, have gone off the rails to the point where their parents can no longer cope. Yes, it can be hard raising children at any time of life, so it would seem unfair to expect the oldest generation to step into the breach; but they do, and they do it well. Maybe they can't slam-dunk a few hoops, or kick a soccer ball around anymore, but the wisdom and experience they have gained over the years, not to mention a certain mellowing of temperament, makes them ideal mentors, teachers and confidantes. Surprisingly, there seems to be a mutual respect between quite young and pretty old which is often missing in the original family set up. Perhaps this extended generation gap is a necessary factor, the parties in the new arrangement being far enough removed that they can actually see where the other is coming from. Whereas they wouldn't think twice about having a blazing row with Mum or Dad, children tend to be more considerate of their grandparents and less inclined to back-chat them. There is, apparently, a definite connection between the youngest and oldest members of the family unit, something of a re-discovery in a way, because the important role of elders as child-minders might have been taken for granted in the past, but in modern times it seemed to have been forgotten.

The tendency to consider those approaching their use-by date as superfluous is a product of the throw-away society we embrace. Naturally you can't just take them down to the dump along with the busted lawn mower, but often they are barely tolerated, a nuisance-factor that takes up space, a constant reminder that you with your technology have lost the plot, and the old days were far better, according to their frequently repeated stories of "when they were young". Because they've heard these anecdotes so many times, their own children turn a deaf ear; but their children's children seem to soak up these fascinating tales of yesteryear with relish. Not only is there entertainment value in the stories but, like most fairy tales, they are intertwined with morals and consequences, consideration and responsibility, those necessary pillars of civilisation that schools have been trying to cement into kids for ages. But did any of them listen to the teachers? Probably not, because the ones telling them, although older, were still too young, so what would they know? The *really* old ones, however, must know - they'd been there, done that and, despite it being a bit frayed around the neck, they were still wearing the T shirt! Old-fashioned ideals would seem to be coming back into vogue; and who better to impart them than old-fashioned practitioners?

More even-tempered than the immediate parents, these further-removed relatives can bring a tolerance and stability to the family, a calming influence that is almost a lost art in these days of rush and tear. As for healthy living, the wrinklies are definitely on the ball. They aren't averse to the odd take-out pizza or Thai, but when they do cook, which is most of the time, it is real food that actually tastes good. Before Nan took over the kitchen, no self-respecting kid would even look at broad beans or a brussel sprout; now they are prepared to give them a go. That's

the result of respect and concern for another's feelings - mind you, youngsters would probably draw the line when it came to liver and onions, something that Grandma knows instinctively.

Organisation and etiquette are also skills being re-invented, but in ways that can be accepted - slowly, carefully and appreciative of the fact that bad habits can't be changed overnight. There will be disagreements over this and other "new" rules as they are introduced, but they are less emotional and heated. Throwing a tantrum while screaming at the top of your voice is a waste of energy when Grand-pop just sits quietly and waits for you to finish making a fool of yourself. Afterwards, there are no recriminations. The wise old man simply listens and talks and understands; and somehow manages to fix the problem that no-one else could. There's no secret to this: it is born of a long life spent learning many things, making plenty of mistakes when his own children were young, and being older and wise enough not to repeat them. It is a wonderful solution and will endure all the time the old folk can keep on keeping on.

How long that is likely to be will probably be down to health issues that come with old age. I can almost guarantee that willingness won't be a factor, because grandparents are simply grandparents till their dying day. They won't shirk their responsibility, not where family is concerned; and even after they are gone, the legacy of their guidance will continue: in the minds of their children who will become grandparents themselves one day; and especially in the hearts of the grandchildren. Some might consider this devotion to duty a selfless act of charity; I believe, however, it is quite the opposite: the old ones may seem to be putting their autumn years on hold; but they are actually giving themselves a second chance by thoroughly enjoying a wonderful rejuvenated springtime.

A Season of Happiness - helping you towards a better lifestyle

For a look at some more informative articles on a variety of subjects just click on the navigation bar



Focus



Money Matters



Healthy Living



eBook previews



Recipes



Popcorn

Where every effort has been made to be accurate and fair-minded, comments and opinions expressed on this website are based on personal experience and do not necessarily reflect the views of the wider community or those groups and institutions mentioned. A Season of Happiness and its staff accept no responsibility for any outcome based on suggestions offered. What works for us may not work for you. Please bear this in mind.