

Generating one thing after another

On growing up



The freewheelin'
Peter Geyer

Intelligence has
no level of fitness
attached

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Give it all you've got
To do it right
To do it wrong
To get caught
To start a day like yesterday
To start a day like yesterday

Inara George

Life seems fairly much continuous. You wake up each morning where you lay down the night before. Barring a quiet burglary or extreme events, the world will be the same as your consciousness left it.

Like a burglar, age can creep in without you noticing. Some people find this quite confronting.

These days one can do a lot to ameliorate the physical aspects of ageing. A prevalent television advertisement includes a curiously choking claim that hair loss is a medical condition. There's Botox and other enhancements, all under the mantra of choice, as well as the mainstays of weight loss regimes, hair dyes and fake tans.

Keeping the mind healthy is also rising in importance, or at least in promotion. The various exercises and methods seem to be associated with logic or thinking, which may not be of much interest to those preferring other modes of life. A good book seems much more interesting to me, and others may prefer mental activity through sociability.

Perhaps these exercises reflect more the personalities and interests of the researchers than anything else. It wouldn't be the first time in human history that has occurred.

Fitness itself has become important, on the basis that it helps the brain work better.

That may be true.

Making excellent and appropriate decisions, however, involves other things. It's helpful to *know* something, for instance—and to know when you don't know or when you're out of your depth. Intelligence (however defined), like stupidity, has no level of fitness attached. This doesn't mean that being physically fitter isn't a good thing, or an advantage in some situations; simply that every claim has its limits.

Physical fitness, at least in appearance, seems important for other reasons. Mia Freedman observes that the rising number of shirtless young men in the streets and elsewhere seems to be a competition with other young men, much as women dress for themselves and other women (2010).

Kate Holden, in her self-professed 'new-found yoga supremacy', admits that there's more than a little bit of fakery in it all, part of a 'weird culture of simulations', whether it be Facebook or the carefully-arranged dishevelled or muscular appearance—according to taste, if not purpose (2010).

One can be postmodern about it all and call it 'mediated selves'. Or we can go to narcissism or unconscious behaviour, depending on choice.

Choice itself is problematic, not only because life is currently assessed on making good and bad decisions, with a fair share of blame hurled around. Shaming, a core component of medieval village justice, seems to be the preferred way of problem-solving for many in current society. Obesity, however defined, seems to attract blame and accusations of laziness.

Yet, as Jill Stark points out, blaming is not a workable strategy in this field (2010), or in others for that matter. It's easier to project

and blame, than to discover what's wrong or not working. This is notwithstanding an obvious appeal as a kind of *Schadenfreude* compatible with current 'reality' culture, comprised of 'professional nitpickers just like family', as Lorelei Vashti points out with some pleasure (2010).

Whether this kind of family conversation is healthy or not may be open to question, as are judgements (choices?) concerning food and its consumption.

Families are the leading saboteurs of healthy eating and its provision in schools, for instance (Cornish 2010). This isn't all that surprising upon observing the contents of family trolleys in supermarkets, and the behaviours of those who push them. Not everybody approaches food in the same way.

As with physical fitness, you need other attributes in order to make good decisions. At the supermarket it may include what used to be called mental arithmetic, a qualification in early childhood development, or negotiation skills.

Perhaps there are too many things to make decisions about: e.g. banking, education, superannuation, gas, electricity and so on, where a need may be simply functional, or require special knowledge and skills.

Richard Alleyne reports that too much choice is stressful for human beings, who can feel overwhelmed about making the right choices, including what others might think of what they have done (2010). This leaves aside individual personality attributes and orientations which may be significant.

National choice

In modern times ... what people are ready to perish for is the nation. Like God, the nation is immortal, indivisible, invisible yet all-encompassing, without origin or end, worthy of our dearest love, and the very ground of our being. Like God, too, its existence is a matter of collective faith. There would not be a nation unless we believed there was.

Terry Eagleton (2005)

For some, being Australian is a choice in a somewhat black-and-white way, paradoxically expressed in the American phrase 'love it or leave it'. This influence extends to stickers expressing nationalistic views, usually paraded on vehicles, in some cases accompanied by fluttering Australian flags. My working-class multicultural suburb has quite a few, which gives me the idea of an armed camp or frontier fort, with images of unclean hordes waiting to invade a pristine land just below the horizon. A feeling of circling the wagons, at any rate.

The parallel exhortation 'Go back where you came from!' can be problematic for many, particularly if, as for Yumi Stynes, it's a place like Swan Hill, on the Murray River (Kalina 2010).

As Terry Eagleton implies, there's a religious, even evangelical, tone to this sort of perspective, perhaps in the way that Americans write about America, without including anywhere else. This provides a dilemma for assessing and implementing American ideas and research outside their cultural milieu, notwithstanding the universal nature of aspects of personality, as in the current education debate, or being positive.

Barbara Ehrenreich has received much Australian attention for writing about the problems of taking a positive approach to everything, including the ability of those promoting such a point of view to remain genial and positive themselves, but it's all about America (2009). Perhaps that's the point.

In both countries historical events can be interpreted, or even ignored, in the context of what the nation is imagined as being: Don Bradman as exemplar, for instance, or the character and motives of George Washington. The Tea Party movement in the USA has little to do with the original Boston event, other than essentially being staged for commercial and political motives outside the expressed associated myth.

Niall Fitzgerald includes an interpretation of this and other events in his history of the British Empire, supporting the current view that the American Revolution is much better seen as a civil war than anything else (2004).



Being Australian is
a black-and-white
choice for some

In Australia, India and elsewhere, the influence of British evangelicals seeking to convert the heathen masses was strong enough to be expressed as a main purpose for colonisation and exploration, from people such as David Livingstone to the most unchurchlike John McDouall Stuart, doyen of European explorers of Australia (Bailey 2006). Stuart's experience with those upholding the moral code of the times is instructive, as certain rewards were denied him due to his somewhat asocial way of life, including alcoholism.

A similar evangelical push in the USA has indirectly resulted in some curious outcomes. It was recently discovered that highly sophisticated gun sights provided to the Australian Army contained Biblical references, presumably adding the power of God to the act of firing. They have been identified as 'spiritually transformed firearm[s] of Jesus Christ', a phrase which has some interesting connotations about American military activities.

Theologically, this is quite curious, even though historically there are many antecedents for that kind of view. In mainstream Christianity this kind of aggression seems to have been left to St Michael, or other angelic beings. Simon Moyle, however, asks, 'If Jesus had a gun, who would he shoot?' (2010). On the little we know of him, one suspects no-one. Perhaps he's confused or conflated with Richard the Lionheart before Jerusalem, or General Gordon in Khartoum.

In reviewing some key events in post-war European history, the historian Tony Judt suggests that a main reason for the importance of military solutions in US foreign policy (no matter which administration is in charge) was its success in using that method, as opposed to the reluctance of European nations, due to their experience of wars in the first half of the 20th century (2009). Biblical quotations on gun sights are a whole other thing, of course, something he doesn't address.

Although American culture is pervasive these days, aspects of the British Empire under which contemporary Australia has its origins continue to influence notions of nation. This is somewhat like what Gary

Marcus calls a *kluge*—a solution that is clumsy or inelegant but effective, something cobbled together (2008).

Marcus applies that term to the human brain, providing a useful corrective to models, research and even religions that presume the perfection of the human body and mind. It also seems applicable to political and social structures, particularly those in which short-term decisions are continually made.

Prince William recently visited Australia to great effect. Somewhat incongruously described as handsome, this approachable young man displayed a friendliness and openness that some compared with his late mother's. This suggested that whenever he and his brother behaved like normal human beings, it had nothing to do with their own personal attributes and training, but was channelled in from elsewhere.

Future days

It may be that people born at different times, however stratified, have their own unique experiences that separate them from other times. This seems to be the presumption behind the 'Generations' fad, notwithstanding conjecture about the dividing lines of categories and the presumption of classless living that it implies.

We want the world and we want it ... now?

Jim Morrison

The recent 30th anniversary of what has been identified as Generation Y stimulated newspaper profiles of representatives of this group (four people, selected as examples). Neither the statements nor the naiveté would have been out of place in similar interviews or proclamations of individuals from the 1960s, or any other designated modern period.

Lucy Battersby, a representative of this generational category, writes that

according to arbitrary definitions used by demographers and marketing gurus, everyone who celebrates their 30th birthday this year has the same habits, objectives and



The 'Generations' fad: Generation Y and Baby Boomers

attitudes. But really, the only thing that we have in common is that we grew up at the same time.

She proceeds to describe a few variants for consideration, some troublesome from a societal point of view (2010).

As with other categories, there are real problems in glibly stating 'Baby Boomers are like this', 'Generation Ys are like that' or, for that matter, 'If you can remember the Sixties, you weren't there'. You have to watch this with type categories, too—even though that's not how the leading writers and teachers in type express their knowledge.

Claims like this are simply deadeners of enquiry and knowledge. The novelist Jenny Diski, for instance, has written a memoir of her experiences in the 1960s (2009). The growing number of tomes and interviews and videos produced by still-extant rock musicians from that period indicate that whatever was lost, it wasn't memory. Marianne Faithfull has learned she doesn't really know anything about men, for instance, which seems paradoxical, considering her personal myth (Rocca 2010).

Perhaps learning of that sort has to do with what insights you were after. It relates to other fields as well.

Bain Attwood has researched the different meanings and associations over time of the treaty made by John Batman with Aboriginal people in the vicinity of what today is Melbourne (2009).

Rod Liddle concludes that children are all little fascists because famous children's authors were all conservative people—forgetting the allure of the ripping yarn and the magic of adventure, as well as the autonomy of the characters in these tales (2001).

An *Age* supplement recently described the gardens in Melbourne as hundreds of years old, which brought up visions of Aboriginal people tending roses and the like as Batman and Fawcner wended their separate ways up the Yarra River. AC/DC are apparently a Melbourne band, although none of them seem to come from there.

This approach of ignoring the facts or the past, or even avoiding what seems to be a clear course of action, might be because the same sorts of people make the decisions in whatever generation or time category you can think of, back to Elizabeth I and centuries before that.

Solutions through marketing, a colourful way of avoiding core issues, weren't invented specifically to deal with issues of the safety of Indian students and others working here, or creating a Ministry of Respect—as though making a statement is sufficient for people to not only know what it means, but to start applying its tenets. A judge makes a decision on a song copyright without appearing to understand much at all about music of any kind and how it is created and composed.



'We grew up at the same time'

Maybe stating that there isn't a problem is a requirement of being positive. There's something wrong if it's not right, so you defend the indefensible. This is a core point of Ehrenreich's book, and is particularly relevant to personality development. It doesn't mean that the alternative is 'nit-picking' or 'negativity', or going somewhere else. The world and its problems aren't black and white.

In any case, young people losing their lives on the roads or by their own hands don't seem to be helped by the current approach, no matter how 'precious' they may be or whatever 'potential' they might have had. Their experiences, had by more than one 'generation', used to be called *anomie*, and there's little positive about that.

That seems to me to be a priority for a society to work on, if we're really interested in community and our fellow human beings, regardless of flag, origin or belief. ❖

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