

The Older I get the more I need to . . .

Listen to my friends. When Robin Lloyd-Jones asked me as the managing editor of PlaySpace Publications to edit and print *Autumn Voices*, I agreed and wrote a letter to Creative Scotland (CS) to support his application for funding to interview 21 writers in Scotland over 70 years old. He needed an agreement from a publisher before CS would give him a grant. Since I had just turned 70, Robin invited me to be interviewed. He told me the interviews usually lasted no more than an hour. After two hours, Robin asked if he could write a book about me! I agreed on the proviso that the book would not be just about me but a springboard towards the philosophy of Ubuntu (I Am Because We Are). For the next 9 years Robin collected stories and anecdotes from over 60 people who have known me as a friend, colleague, lover, husband, and so on. Robin beavered away at this writing project for the next 9 years and wrote/gathered/edited over 800 pages. About a month before Robin died in **September** 2024, when he could still stand and greet me with a warm welcoming hug, we talked about the book – I Am Because We Are – and we agreed that Robin would not be able to finish the book; and if the book could be finished, we needed an editorial team. It took me a couple of weeks to build a team including a tech adviser who used to work for Twitter, a proofreader who used to work for Strathclyde University proofreading research papers, two selecting editors, and a “spicer” who reads chapters that are nearly ready and helps me add spice to the text. The older I get the more help I need with my writing.

The most positive aspect of getting older, for me, has to do with grandchildren and legacy and also having a quieter and deepening relationship with my wife and other people who I am close to. Witnessing my sons grow up and

establishing themselves in the world. My older son – Ossian – set up his own business as an arborist and called it “Tranquillitree”; and my younger son – Colum – is a care worker for the Richmond Fellowship. And there is now the joy of being a grandfather for the past 13 years, and 10 years ago my wife and I were asked to be “Buddha parents” to the daughter of dear friends. Ossian and his wife Mel have two children. So we now have the pleasure of four young people in our lives. Since they all live in Glasgow, we have frequent play times together. The older I get, the more I need to play.

Getting older has increased my curiosity about death. For the past 14 years, I’ve been part of a small group, a sort of co-operative inquiry about death & dying. David Donnison was our scribe and after he died in 2018, I published a book called “Living Our Dying” (Robin Lloyd-Jones has two articles in this book). An acknowledgement of death increases my appreciation of life: on my shrine in my bedroom, where I meditate are photographs of more than 100 people I knew who are all dead. At least three or four times a week at the end of a meditation, I speak their full names....then a flash of memory will come of what that person gave to me. The older I get the more I am grateful for. And as a Buddhist, I’m naturally curious about what happens after death. Another adventure in to the unknown and perhaps unknowable?!? Everyday I remind myself that “I may die to day” – there is an Art of Dying which requires skill and training. You wouldn’t start training for a marathon the day before the race, nor study for an exam the day before the exam.

I’ve learned much about ageing and creativity from some amazing role models in my life: David Donnison, who died at 92 and wrote poetry, painted pictures and played the concertina right to the end; Cid Corman, author of *Livingdying*, inspired my interest in oriental poetry; with John Heron who died at 93,

together we were pioneers of co-counselling and peer support groups; Robin Lloyd Jones who died just before his 90th birthday, we became close friends and writing collaborators during the last 10 years of his life. My mother who died just before her 100th birthday, she inspired me to keep going no matter what . . .

I wonder how long I will live. But even so, I know that I could die tomorrow. I like having people in my life who are older and staying creative. I love gazing at Rembrandt's late self-portraits – he had such a curiosity about ageing. I seek that out in people.

My best advice to people aspiring to maintain their creativity into later life is keep going, don't stop. Stay open to what you really want to do. Keep asking the question, *'What am I doing with my life? Is this what I really want to do? Am I doing what is true to my heart? Am I open and loving towards those around me?'* Those questions, particularly for an artist of any kind, are the vital ones. Never stop asking them. I've asked these questions at many times in my life especially when I'm feeling overwhelmed and anxious. I journal to find out what I think or feel about a specific question, project, or person. If there is no verbal answer emerging, I practice Authentic Movement to embody a direction, and being witnessed by another helps me puzzle towards a deeper meaning. I have a recurrent habit which many might share of I taking on too many projects, and my heart then tends to close down and withdraw. I need the daily practice of *Doing Nothing* to find balance, poise and resilience to stay open-hearted. One precept I repeatedly tell myself is *K.I.S.S = Keep It Simple Sweetheart!* And as a reminder, I have this poster quote from Thomas Merton pinned to my wall:

To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence.

The older I get the more I need to exercise in all ways – physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. Getting up in the morning, I often feel stiff and sore in my joints and spine. Every day I need to do yoga stretches, run on our trampoline, tap my body all over following acupuncture points, lift weights, tendon stretches for the knees, taiji and qikong for suppleness and energy, cycling and walking, wild swimming and climbing mountains . . .

The older I get, stories seem to multiply; poems arrive unexpectedly in the middle of a meal; dream stories in the middle of the night, on a walk, watching a film, listening to music. Most of the time I'm too late, I miss it. I remember the boy scout motto: Be Prepared! The older I get the more I need to be ready to write, to keep a notebook with me all the times. As a writer I have several precepts that I try to follow such as:

P.P.P. – Patiently Pursue the Possible. Another friend Richard Landis wrote an illustrated book of “Anywhichway” aphorisms and one began with “*anything is possible, anything can happen if you have imagination on the wrinkles of your brain*”. And we all do!

G.S.A.E – Go Slow Arrive Early – for me this means getting ready at least 10 minutes before I need to leave the house and get on my bike.

B.M.S.L – Be More Self Less – as I reminder I commissioned a friend to carve these words on stone in a rising spiral and it's mounted in the middle of a pond at our allotment.

Whatever You Write is Right – You Can't Write the Wrong Thing. This is the first line of a writing prescription written by Gillie Bolton for a research project in a GP surgery. The conclusion was that those who did the writing went to the GP less and when they did go, they much more articulate about what was wrong them.

The older I get the slower I write, the more I ponder and savour the sound of words, the meaning of movement, the taste of syllables, the scent of space between words, the touch of silence. The older I get the more I need to listen longer, chew the words until they're sweet, sour or serious. The older I get the more I need to laugh. To laugh at my own mistakes, to forgive my impatience, to do nothing for at least 15 minutes every day. . . then freely write for another 15 minutes.

The older I get the less I need to impress anyone and the less I need to plan my day, my week, my year; overfilling my diary is a form of hiding. I don't want to hide anymore. the older I get the less I want to try to look good. This reminds me of a short film my late friend Thom Osborn made called Blemish about two people in their 80ies falling in love and admiring their warts as marks of beauty. Thom was one of my mentors, a role model of ageing well and creatively. After starting his working life as a psychiatrist, he shifted to writing and performing in theatre and films, then at the age of 60 he became a trapeze artist!

The older I get the less I want to pretend, the more I want to simply be open loving and kind to all living beings, the more I want to offer random acts of kindness. The more I want to play everyday in every way!

My name is Larry Butler aka Sukhema. After 10 years training for ordination, the name Sukhema was given to me by my meditation teacher. It literally means "he who is very peaceful and at ease" I usually translate it as "he who is

trying to be very peaceful and at ease – but not always succeeding!”. The name was given as a carrot, an incentive, a direction to strive towards, a practice. The older I get, the more I’m beginning to embody “Sukhema”.