

# Growing old- miracle or destiny?

One day I had an idea: what it would be like if I were to write down my thoughts about growing old. This idea fascinates me and at the same time is quite scary.

This year I turned 82. If I want to put my thoughts about being old on paper, I can't help but reflect on my life as I experience it at the moment in the here and now.

I am aware that it will be a challenge for me to describe this journey of mine up to the present day in such a way that I can reconcile it with what is true to me.

When Bernd and I went into our well-deserved retirement in August 2011, I was full of optimism that I would be able to live my life being as carefree as I had always dreamed of. I imagined how it would be to no longer have to get up early, to be able to enjoy my everyday life without responsibilities and obligations, and to finally have enough time for myself.

In many respects, I had always been able to prepare for the next stage of life and to make appropriate decisions. But I could only prepare for the last phase of life to a limited extent because my increasing physical and mental decline was already beginning to affect me.

It's always said, "Growing old is not for sissies" but I didn't know if that meant me; is getting old only for other people or also for me?

Anyway, it wasn't long before the first shock hit me completely unexpectedly. After several times of not being able to see the little white ball while playing boules on the beach, I had an eye test done, which gave me a negative result of "Age-related macular degeneration", which is not curable and would progressively get worse, possibly to the point of going blind. The good news was that my eyes could be treated with regular injections, slowing down the steady progression of the disease. Thanks to my health insurance, I had good medical treatment. I remained confident and did not want to let this bad news get me down.

However, we had already organized a 3-month trip to Australia for spring 2012, had booked the flight and were really looking forward to the trip. However, we had made our plans not knowing what lay around the corner. When my specialist doctor found out about our travel plans, he insisted that we cancel the trip. The necessary six-weekly injections were not to be interrupted under any circumstances. He told us in no uncertain terms that we should postpone the holiday until next year, so he could then organize with a colleague to give me the necessary injection in Melbourne. This was like a slap in the face.

We had hoped to continue our tradition of travelling as we had started it in the years before our retirement, namely, to go on one major trip each year. We had already travelled to New Zealand, Kenya and Tanzania, Canada, USA, British Virgin Islands, Trinidad/ Tobago, Cyprus and Cuba.

Postponing the trip to Australia until the next year proved to be no problem. We had an exceptionally eventful time in Australia. We rented a camper van and crisscrossed the country for a good three months, visiting friends along the way.



We had an unforgettable experience right at the beginning of the trip in Melbourne. My appointment at the eye clinic was booked for 3pm. I had to find two adjacent parking spaces for the camper van in the city center, which proved to be very difficult. I was getting visibly more anxious and nervous, and we were not at all sure if we would make it to the clinic in time. At the last minute we found what we were looking for. However, a traffic sign indicated that parking was only allowed until 4pm, because the lane had to be clear for rush hour traffic. There was a warning that cars would be towed away immediately if the sign was disregarded.

In my experience, the treatment should only take about 15 minutes, so we should still manage within time. However, the treatment took much longer and shortly before 4pm I had to give Bernd the car key, hoping he wouldn't have to use it. He had never driven the camper van before.

As soon as Bernd was behind the wheel the tow truck promptly arrived. He signaled to the driver with the key in his hand that he was about to drive off. 10 minutes later, the towing service was on the spot again. This time Bernd's gesture didn't help. He had no choice. He started the engine, looked in the rear-view mirror once more and saw me coming at that moment. It was on a knife's edge.

We wondered where Bernd could have gone and how I could ever have found him. We didn't have mobile phones in those days. Actually, I wasn't allowed to drive for the next 4 hours after the treatment because the eye drops kept my pupils dilated. Nevertheless, I drove off in spite of my half-blind eyes. Bernd guided me safely out of Melbourne through the rush hour traffic. We were glad that we had managed to survive this well.

The rest of the journey through the beautiful, diverse and seemingly endless landscapes was an extraordinary experience and will remain in our memories forever. It rekindled our wanderlust, which we have always had. We were determined that our aches and pains would not prevent us from continuing to conquer other countries.

Here is a brief overview of the trips we made after we visited Australia:

2014 California



Monument Valley

2015 St Vincent



Caribbean

2016 S. Africa



Cape Town

2016 Botswana		Chobe River
2016 Zimbabwe		Victoria Falls
2016 United Arab Emirates		Mosque Abu Dhabi
2017 India		Taj Mahal
2017 Bhutan		Festival
2017 Nepal		Kathmandu
2018 Thailand		Chiang Rai
2018 Myanmar		Mandalay
2019 Sri Lanka		Central Province
2019/20 India		Eye Clinic

Meanwhile, we also repeatedly took shorter trips to visit family and friends in Germany, Switzerland and Austria.

From 2005 onwards until 2022 we enjoyed our house in the Eastern Algarve with friends, usually in the autumn.

Until 2022 Portugal		Casa Alegria
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Now that the covid pandemic is over, we have booked another trip to Japan for the end of October 2023. We think this will probably be our last major journey.

Looking at and selecting the photos of our many trips, I felt a certain nostalgic longing to bring back the past with all the experiences they convey. The memories of so many beautiful hours made me feel joyful, and yet at the same time an oppressive sadness spread through my soul with the knowledge that it is over and cannot be repeated.

Are these ambivalent feelings a side effect of growing old? In any case, I often notice that I have to deal with these paradoxical feelings in certain situations.

For example, when I realize that I can't just climb onto a chair to hammer a nail into the wall like I used to, losing my balance and someone has to help me, I can easily fall into sheer despair in which I struggle with myself and the world instead of accepting the fact that it's the way it is and being happy about what I can still do. If and when I manage to do this, my world is all right again.

Further shocks were not long in coming.

My hearing was getting worse and various hearing tests left no doubt: my hearing loss was mercilessly confirmed. In addition, around the same time Bernd was diagnosed with the same eye condition that I had. This sent us into a panic. We had to learn to deal with our fears and how we wanted to live our lives if we were both to become almost blind.

In November 2014, I had four heart bypasses inserted. Fortunately, angina pectoris was detected in time, avoiding a possible heart attack.

Another mishap occurred in October 2018 while we were on holiday in our house in Portugal. When I woke up one morning, I was deeply shocked as all I could see in my right eye was a large black spot. In a panic, we immediately went to the hospital. The diagnosis was a massive blood clot caused by a ruptured vein. Unfortunately, this can be a side effect of all the injections. I was inconsolable. My right eye was now the better of the two.

I did not give up hope that the blood clot could be dissolved by intensive treatment. To do this, I had to lie still and flat on my stomach face down for several hours a day for 14 days. Fortunately, a massage table with a headrest helped. This was a terrible ordeal, which I dutifully took upon myself. At the end of this ordeal the blood clot actually had dissolved. However, what was now visible was that the retina had also been injured in the process. Unfortunately, this damage cannot be healed. What remains is grey shadow in the center of the eye. Only at the periphery can I see a bit clearer.

Before I go on lamenting about my growing disabilities, I would like to write about my perception of being and growing old, which I had in my childhood.

I was 10 years and 7 months old when my mother celebrated her 40th birthday. Somehow the number 40 seemed eerie to me. I was upset inside, ran to my mother, wrapped my arms around her and tried to suppress my tears as the words spilled out of me: "Please, please Mum, not 40, that's much too old, please stay 39, that's much better."

Later, when I turned 40 myself, this scene came back to me. I couldn't help but smile. How much my perception of being old has changed from then to now. 40 is still quite acceptable now, especially when I imagined living another 40 years. That possibility sounded very tempting at the time, and looking back on the past 40 years, I am impressed by how varied and eventful these years were for me. To live another 40 years was an idea whose magnitude appealed to me, a period of time that seemed endless

and in which I could still experience so much more. In the meantime, 42 years have flown by. Now I have to adjust to my age of 82 with all the limitations and disabilities.

There are mainly two unpleasant disabilities that I am confronted with on a daily basis and have to learn to deal with accordingly, namely my hearing loss and my visual impairment. Both of them presented themselves a few years after my 70th birthday.

As a result of the injured retina in my right eye, I was diagnosed with partial visual impairment. It means that I can no longer do many things, such as driving a car and riding a bicycle, reading books and newspapers (which is now and for some time has only been possible with a magnifying glass). I now only recognize faces when they are very close. Going to the theatre is no longer pleasurable and watching television can only be enjoyed to a limited extent on my laptop.

It is also difficult to orientate myself in public and there are many other things that I can no longer manage on my own.

Fortunately, hearing aids help with my hearing loss. Nevertheless, my hearing quality suffers considerably. I no longer enjoy listening to music, the sound frequencies are distorted and the voices of the people around me do not sound natural. It is also like this when I talk on the phone. People who don't know me talk too fast and often with an unclear accent. When we are in a room with friends, I can hardly follow a conversation in the group even with the hearing aid. They usually speak too quietly and in a jumbled way. I sit there saying nothing and feeling helpless. Bernd asks me to explain to everyone and to ask that only one person speaks at a time and that everyone speaks slowly, loudly and clearly. However, my experience is that even when I ask for this, it doesn't take long for everyone to continue talking in the usual way. Indeed, even Bernd doesn't comply. But he thinks I have to keep insisting and keep repeating my request. Since I don't want to annoy anyone, I hold back and am resigned to my fate. I go more into my inner world. This is more or less the situation I find myself in everyday at the moment.

Nevertheless, I am happy and very glad that I don't live alone and that I know I have Bernd by my side. I admire him for the way he has taken over many of the tasks I used to do over the course of time. This has had a significant impact on the dynamics of our being together. Conflicts do not stay away and are not always easy to solve. He tries very hard to support me in many ways, for which I am very grateful. I often feel guilty about not being good enough and despair at how clumsy I can be at mastering even the seemingly simplest things, such as pouring the red wine into the glass and not beside it. André Gide can hardly console me with his saying: "Old age also has health benefits: For example, you spill quite a lot of the alcohol you want to drink."

I am totally frustrated and become despondent more often and could just scream like crazy. I become impatient more quickly and have to discharge my inner stress with angry outbursts. However, I can overcome these feelings by imagining that everything could be worse and that I am doing quite well really, unlike other friends such as Clover and Gini who have to be cared for in nursing homes around the clock. Then I'm happy with myself and the world again, I'm optimistic and confident, until the next mishap.

Resilience is a quality that is becoming more and more ingrained in me, namely not letting my circumstances get me down and strengthening the positive force in me; accepting what is coming and not being afraid of dying. I have always been an optimist with a sunny disposition. I also think that I have prepared myself relatively well for old age. As Cicero said: "Age is not a question of years, but of attitude." To stay reasonably physically fit, I have been doing exercises for about an hour in the morning

for many years. To stay mentally fit and agile, I memorize various song lyrics in both languages. This helps me to feel good.

At this point, I would like to quote Hildegard Knef's song lyrics, which she sang in the 60s, as an example. I particularly like it because it impressively describes the cycle of life.

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*One and one make two,  
So, kiss and don't think,  
For thinking harms the illusion.  
Everything turns, turns in a circle,  
And when you go off the rails  
It's just experience.  
- Instead of revelation -  
What does it matter.  
Man in himself is lonely.  
And remains abandoned.  
Do we not seek together?  
A little piece of happiness.  
The happiness you trampled underfoot.  
A whole life long,  
But with a few kisses  
Suddenly you have it at home.  
One and one, that makes two,  
There's always one heart.*

*And if you're lucky, it's two.*

*No one will invent the recipe,*

*No one will fathom it,*

*Sometimes it's for life.*

*And sometimes it just remains -*

*only a love affair.*

*Man in himself is a coward.*

*And is ashamed of his feeling,*

*That no one should show it,*

*Because morality wants it that way.*

*But if the worst comes to the worst*

*He hides in the dark,*

*The good Lord sees everything.*

*And has long since discovered him.*

*One and one, that makes two,*

*So, kiss and smile*

*Even if sometimes you feel like crying.*

*Happy the one who enjoys today.*

*And what is past, forget.*

*It comes as it must come:*

*First comes the first kiss,*

*Then comes the last kiss,*

*Then comes the end.”*

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A few years ago, friends told me that my life story was worth telling. So, I started to write it down. It is now published as a book in German and English. The process of writing has brought me joy. It has fulfilled me, and I am proud of it.

Although Bernd is 6 years younger, he has also his problems with his eyes and some other health complaints. Fortunately, he can still drive, which makes our lives easier, for example for the now more frequent doctor and hospital appointments. He has also taken over the weekly shopping at the supermarket and plans our food supplies for the week accordingly. I admire him for how he organizes everything so well. I don't have to worry about it anymore and only need to ask what is to be cooked today. In order not to search for a longer time, Bernd lays out all the ingredients for me, so I can prepare the meals without stress. I am the chef in the house, so to speak. I also bake our daily bread and often delicious cakes. This is my contribution to being useful, and it is very important to me.

One question we had been asking ourselves for a long time and had discussed with friends was, where we wanted to live when we were no longer able to look after ourselves. In good time, we looked at several retirement homes. We found some that we liked and that met our needs and requirements. We expressed our interest and left our address. But it was not then the time to act. We were then happy to leave it and wait a bit longer. The thought of giving up our home and having to move again was horrible.

Our friend Jane, who witnessed our conversations, suggested she would be willing to help us. We could hire her as our carer. Then we could stay in our house and not have to move again. This was an outstanding idea and we agreed to set it up. Jane would sell her house in Devon and look for a house near us. We managed to make this plan work.

Jane has been part of our everyday life for a good 3 years now. We are very happy that she supports us in many areas. She is a multitasking person who seems like a godsend to us. She is an excellent gardener, is medically trained, is computer literate, is handy and on top of this is a humble and cheerful person.

Her dog, Connie, who we look after during the working week, has also become an enrichment to our lives. She is an adorable bundle of energy, a cockapoo who keeps us on our toes.

It couldn't be better.

Talking about being lucky, we have friends who support us with advice and help and enrich our lives. This gives me strength and energy to be creative.

Thanks to modern technologies like laptop computers and iPads, there are many ways for me to keep busy and be creative. I can read and write, hear and see and connect with the outside world. This makes my life much easier. For example, it is fun to use the Sketchbook apps with the iPad. Playing with colors and abstract shapes without thinking, just doodling and seeing what comes out of it, is both relaxing and meditative. In the meantime, I have already produced over 400 sketches. Not bad!

Since starting my biography, I have found pleasure in writing. I have written three short essays so far, based on personal experience. The fourth is this one about my process of ageing.



I can say for myself that I definitely feel at times the way Goethe says: "Even old age has its blossom."

The more I reflect on growing old, the more aware I become that I am in the last phase of life. Can I really prepare for my death? That seems impossible. However, I can think about it and talk about it.

Bernd and I also discussed about how we want to arrange our funeral. I want to be cremated and my ashes scattered in the sea at the East Head in West Wittering, near our home.

I perceived myself early on in such a way that I am not separate, but one with the universe. I usually express it like this:

"I am a drop of water and at the same time the ocean".

Seen in this way, my philosophy of life comes full circle when my ashes become part of the ocean.

I would like to add the following: the thought of having to say goodbye saddens me, especially when I can't say goodbye in person, like at the funeral of my friend Marianne and my brother.

The fact that we live in England has not been an obstacle for our friends from Germany to come and visit us. On the contrary, visiting us has always been a welcome opportunity to enjoy the beautiful countryside and the sea. But with increasing age, longer trips are no longer so easy to manage also for Bernd and me. Each time, the question looms, was this the last trip we will ever make?

Now we are thinking about how we can find a suitable process and form which would allow our friends to say a proper farewell to us and us to them. How much time do we have left? No one can answer that - and I consider that to be a good thing.