THE QUARRY

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Tightrope Walking 2020

Michelle's grandson has told her he's too old to need band-aids. So now, leaping from stone to stone of the dragonfly shimmering creek, Samuel knows a fall means he will have to grit his teeth and wish away the hurt. It's their favourite walk; eucalypt scented, dotted with yellow boronia and the jewel-red of mountain devil calyxes. They keep constant watch for the elusive lyre bird singing near his nest in the fern bed.

Samuel is six and for a third of his memory life has lived in a Covid world. He invites his grandmother into his cubby-house shop, with sharp reminders to wear her mask and stand on the X taped to the wooden floor. The lounge room has been taken over by his Lego Covid rescue centre with ambulance, fire-engine, and police car at the ready.

‘Granny! Granny! Come immediately to the rescue centre. You are needed urgently!’

Sunlight falling through the window washes them in its glow as she awaits instructions.

‘These are the Covid dead. You must take them to the cemetery,’he explains, pointing to a pile of Lego figurines heaped in a pick-up truck.

‘I am busy fixing up the Covid sick,’ he adds, busying himself with laying the afflicted on their hospital beds.

On completion of her gruesome task, Granny makes lunch and seats the Covid doctor at the dining table.

‘Granny, how long does it take to get to heaven?’

‘I think it happens pretty quick,’ she reassures.

He nods and, between mouthfuls of cheese and tomato sandwich adds, ‘I’m going to live here, with you, until I’m as old as you are.’

With the meter ticking toward a million dead, and epidemiologists suggesting the number is ten times that, children will live with the effects of the 2020 pandemic year for the rest of their lives. On a global scale this means increased poverty and less health care, the latter already evident with the downturn in vaccination rates in developing nations. Children face decreased access to education and possible loss of family, particularly loss of family elders who are often primary carers for the young. While children seldom become severely unwell with Covid19 the pandemic’s broader ramifications magnify with passing time. The World Health Organisation warns that the improvements in maternal and child mortality made over the past few years could be wiped out as a result of the pandemic.

The effect of stress on pregnant women and young children is already known, as far back as the Dutch potato famine and the 1920 Spanish Flu long term negative consequences of stress have been recorded. In recent years studies have increased our understanding of how these effects occur. Stressors as disparate as a Chilean earthquake, the September 11 attacks, or the sinking of a Swedish ferry, show an association with low-birth weight babies. This likely results from the placenta going into overdrive and producing lots of stress hormones which may slow down foetal growth and increase the risk of early labour. Possible consequences of low birth weight include obesity and childhood diabetes. In the field of epigenetics, a relatively new science which studies small changes in DNA due to environmental factors, the effects of stress on generations to come is also being monitored.

These DNA changes potentially pass from mother to baby and further. This new science has blurred our long-term dichotomy of nature vs nurture with respect to children's physical and psychological health and warns that stressors such as the pandemic should be taken seriously. Government investment to decrease financial burdens on families and to prevent families being rent asunder by pandemic deaths will reap benefits in the long term.

On the penultimate day of September the clock radio wakes me with the catch phrase of this year's news. At the million mark we have reached another "grim milestone," as if this death and disease is purposefully leading to a destination. While the Reaper scythes down the elderly, the 2020 New York Film Festival awards its gold medal for 'best social documentary' to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's series, 'Old People's Home for Four Year Olds'. This unlikely success story won the hearts of Australians and left many tears at its completion. Remarkable for a program about preschool children visiting some, not infrequently grumpy, retirement village residents. The enthusiasm of geriatrician Prof Sue Kurrle, of the Intergenerational Care Project, was infectious, but it was the endearing relationships between the elderly and the children that stole the show.

Intergenerational care is relatively new in Australia whereas other countries have already successfully incorporated it into their care models. There are several studies underway to assess the benefits of these models which vary from frequents visits, as portrayed in the TV series, to shared campus arrangements. The benefits for the elderly were clear to any viewer of the series, as weekly the muscle strengths, personal interactions, and depressions scores of the participants improved. More difficult to measure was the benefit to the children but many parents commented on the youngsters' improved sociability and empathy. Psycho-geriatrician Nancy Wadsworth writes that programs of this nature decrease harmful intergenerational conflicts and problems of social equity. Covid19 has laid bare just such a social equity conflict.

Nine months into the pandemic my social media feeds, with regular monotony, still posit the brilliant idea of simply isolating the elderly and the vulnerable. Then everyone else can get on with their lives and the economy won't be trashed. Covid19 has brought to light swathes of armchair experts who have stumbled on blindingly simple insights that epidemiologists, medical experts, statisticians, and modellers have unfortunately missed. US Fox channel's Tucker Carlson trumpeted the 'isolate the elderly' notion just shy of April 1st

but he wasn't playing a prank. The elderly are scattered throughout the community and often live within family groups. The latter is particularly the case in multicultural and disadvantaged communities. How, in Australia, would we isolate all these vulnerable people? Do we reopen Sydney Harbour National Park's Q station? The views of Manly and The Heads are undoubtedly spectacular, but Victoria's recent and bitter lesson has emphasised that Covid kills the elderly most efficiently if they are housed together.

Aired on the same US TV show a few weeks later was Texas republican governor Dan Patrick who believed that the elderly were entirely willing to die for the cause of keeping the economy running. This brave, if oblivious of his personal privilege, 79-year-old governor complained that no one had reached out to him as a senior citizen and said, 'Are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children and grandchildren?'

'If that's the exchange, I'm all in,' he enthused, adding, 'There are lots of grandparents out there like me.'

Senator Patrick may have been a trifle short of the mark as it didn't take long for #NotDying4WallStreet to become the top Twitter trend. Grandparents were apparently not quite ready to stand in line waiting at the Soylent Green factory. Their generation knows that the year 2022 hasn't yet arrived. When actually asked their opinion many elderly said they would die for their grandchildren but not for the economy.

In 2017 former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott vehemently opposed the euthanasia bill stating, 'I think we'll regard this [bill] a sad milestone in our decline as a decent society.'

Covid has apparently adjusted his opinion which now seems to be that nature, presumably in the form of the virus, should be allowed to take its course and families should elect to keep their elderly relatives comfortable. This is a clever, if transparent, conflation of two different issues. One allows passive euthanasia, which in blocking the bill Abbott effectively vetoed, and the other sacrifices healthy and productive elderly for the mirage of economic stability. Abbott has apparently not looked to the consequences of unchecked viral outbreaks in countries like Brazil, India and, the ever-controversial Swedish model. His notions seem neither epidemiologically sound nor humanitarian.

I was Samuel's age when I spent half a year living with my flamboyant, tousle-haired grandmother. A teacher, artist, writer, and feminist who carried her opinions like a standard before her. Those six months, the clearest memories of my childhood, remain wonder infused. The dawn excursions that saw us set off across the veld to the river while mist still hugged the hollows. She sketched and I discovered brilliant Agama lizards, more rainbow than creature, and watched the yellow-black weaver birds construct their intricate nests. Nests that clung precarious to the thinnest of willow twigs and danced above the water. At night, drowsy under the crazy-block quilt she'd sewn, she wove tales to drift me to sleep. The spy she'd met during the war. How fossils were discovered at Sterkfontein. Why her Pekingese was called Xiao-xiao. She wrote a book about elves and owls, mice and carrots, and dedicated it to her grand-daughter. The hard cover edition retains pride of place on my bookshelf.

South Australia - Flinders ranges - Ikara

In the year before this nightmare one of fire and pestilence, I visited Wilpena Pound, a natural amphitheatre within the Flinders ranges, known as Ikara, the meeting place, to Adnyamathanha people. They have been inhabitants of this rugged red-rock landscape of mountains and sheltering gums for tens of thousands of years. The fossils at nearby Brachina Gorge speak of further life forms so ancient they are mere swirls inscribed in stones.

At night, with stars burning holes in the darkness, there is a welcome to country in Yura Ngawarla, Adnyamathanha language. Children from the city and local kids, who must have heard the tales a hundred times, sit with knees clasped before the fire and listen, intent

faces lit by dancing shadows. Not one stirs as elders pass on culture and life advice the way humanity always has. Next day in Bunyeroo Valley, a red-capped robin, Awi Irta, alights on a reed and I know his brilliant feathered head is a consequence of ignoring his wife. Stories stay with us.

Western society, increasingly obsessed with the young and the beautiful, is quick to discount and discard the elderly. It isn't surprising that in, *Three Uneasy Pieces*, Patrick White laments, 'The callous see us as dispensable objects, like broken furniture or dead flowers'. In contrast, Australian aboriginal communities nurture the importance of elders and their contribution to family life. In aboriginal lore age is less important than wisdom. The Australian Institute of Family Studies tells that, "[elders] hold stories of dreaming, culture, and injustices suffered in the past and keep them safe for youth to understand their place in the world." In some communities the elders are the only remaining people who speak the local language. Sole survivors to pass on a legacy of words.

The city of Leganes, located on the outskirts of Madrid, is prosaically named after the slime the town was built on and is where suspects of the 2004 Madrid train bombing blew themselves up to evade capture. It is also the only place outside of Melbourne with a street named after Australian rock band AC/DC. In Leganes a group of researchers from Montréal collaborated with doctors from the Autonomous University of Madrid in a human longevity study. They found that elderly who were connected with strong family and social networks had longer ten-year survival. However, merely being part of the family isn't enough, those people who were respected and who felt they played an important role in family life benefitted most. Blue zones are areas of the world, such as Okinawa in Japan and Icaria in Greece, that boast the highest number of centenarians. These super-elderly have many dietary and exercise habits in common but they are also respected and socially active members of their families and community. Mutual dependence within families increases longevity and decreases depression in the elderly while the young benefit with culture and wisdom.

These days the waiting room chairs stand spaced and the friendly baskets of tattered magazines have disappeared. Patients wait behind masks, absorbed in their phone screens. The silent glide of the door admits a young boy and his grandfather. Hands cup at the sanitation station, clear solution pumped and dutifully spread. The old man sits with the slow deliberation of age and his grandson leans against him, his small hand resting on the man's arm. The tan of youth as brown as the liver spots of age. Who is looking after who?

I comment to my GP, we've known each other since hospital resident days, on the boy and grandfather. He frowns, concerned that the pandemic will leave a generation of anxious, germophobe children in its wake. Psychologists reassure us that if we talk openly and honestly with children, and are not afraid to sometimes say, 'I don't know', they will keep trusting the adults around them and feel safe. Learning to regularly wash our hands, and cough and sneeze into our elbows, are likely long term positive public health measures. Children should not be shielded from the truth, rather they need honest answers and simple, concrete explanations with positive messages. 'Let's wash our hands so we can stay safe,' being better than threatening with the risk of infection. Australia's 2020 children's laureate Ursula Dubosarsky captures the essence with her Covid kitten poem:

…

'What can we do?' 'Well wash your paws,'
Her mother said, 'And all your claws.'

'We'll stay inside a shut the door.
You'll laugh and hide and read and draw'
…

And wait until the morning when
Our big old world is right again.

Michelle rings to discuss the latest news, President Trump's admission to hospital with Covid. Despite deriding and ignoring all scientific advice this elderly man will receive the latest antibody and anti-viral treatments.

Michelle tells me Samuel has created a 'torch thermometer' to temperature check each customer entering his Covid-safe shop. Samuel, whose home life is a chaotic mix of itinerates, dogs, cats, processed food and late nights, needs his grandmother more than ever during this pandemic. Not only to decently bury deceased Lego figurines, but for stability, and reassurance, and simple joy. When our grandchildren ask us how we lived now, will we with confidence reply that we walked the pandemic tightrope fairly?

When my son was six months old I bundled him onto the long Sydney to Johannesburg flight to visit his great-grandmother. Each day of our time together she held him in her arms. Weeks later, as the smoke-hazed veld dipped below the wing of the plane circling away from Tambo International airport, I knew I would never see her again. My son grew up with stories of the woman who wrote the "carrot- elf" book and we have a photo of four generations together. At ninety-three my grandmother's hair was still not grey.

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