OLDER PEOPLE: VISIBILITY AND EMBODIED EXPERIENCES: SPIRITUALITIES FOR A CHANGING CONTEXT

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“Older people are beautiful!”
“Older people are beautiful images of God!”

Even though contemporary western society is powerfully shaped both by the visual and by an increasingly ageing demographic, the above statements are rare and counter-cultural. Yet they are statements totally true to my own experience as a minister with special responsibility for older people. I am drawn to wondering how the beauty of older people can be highlighted in ways that our culture will see and engage with; and therefore begin to own, and even possibly celebrate the ageing process.

In the first part of my thesis I aim to discover why our society does not see beauty in age, or even perceive age itself. I begin with a historical study of western artistic expressions of beauty, tracing a reoccurring and influential strand of classical symmetry and perfection. A social analysis of our contemporary culture of youth is followed by an overview of the church’s attitudes towards ageing. All three studies reveal a picture of deeply rooted ageism in society. Alongside these discoveries, an alternative perspective and antidote to ageism is offered through an inclusive reader response to Paul’s description of the Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12.

My discoveries inform my choice of research methodology – the ways in which I endeavour to uncover new perceptions of older people and forms of expression that honour and include them. Thus embracing them as part of the Body of Christ. Participant observation, the inclusive tool favoured by social anthropology suits the aesthetic and subjective nature of my research. Older people themselves are my research participants. Group situations, where they play with clay and comment upon portraits and landscapes, enable them to express their perceptions of what is beautiful and so reflect a perceptible beauty of their own. A biblical structure allows the participants’ thoughts about beauty to become expressions of their own particular spirituality.

This uncovering of an embodied reality of older people as vital and beautiful is offered as a counterpoint to a culture that renders older people invisible. I discover that there is much that older people can offer younger generations through their laughter and tears, their interpersonal relationships and their intrepid journeying through the unknown territory of ageing itself. A search for and reflection upon theological perspectives and art images that resonate with these discoveries and illuminate older people as beautiful images of God forms the final part of my thesis.
Declaration

I declare that no portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Richard Kidd for constantly inspiring me to look beyond, and for reminding me that “…the greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something and to tell what is saw in a plain way.” (John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 1843)

Thank you to my husband Nigel, my daughter Julia and son Tom whom I can always look to for new perspectives when my eyes are tired.

Thanks also to Ashby Baptist Church community as a whole, for supporting, encouraging and gently cajoling me throughout my research; to my research participants, in particular, for their insight, time, and trust; and to all the wise-eyed, long-lived members of Christ’s Body who continue to embrace me generously as their friend and daughter.

Preface

Previous degrees:

Batchelor of Librarianship: University College of Wales.
Joint honours degree in Librarianship and English. 2:1
1979.

Batchelor of Arts: University of Manchester.
Degree with First Class Honours in Contextual Theology.
2003
**Introduction**

This very small story hiding within a much bigger story begins to unfold, mid-life, with my becoming a Baptist lay-pastor. Both excited and fearful, I visited my church coffee morning for the first time, to introduce myself and get to know the small community of older people. From an incarnation-embracing theological perspective, I felt I was going to meet and shake hands with the body of Christ. Being shy, I was facing up to the deep personal fears of encountering new people. Being visual, culturised by our ocular age, I was, literally, going to ‘see’ them. Yet on that early autumn morning, just before the Millennium’s turn, I found myself on *terra incognita*, with some of my longest held perceptions overturned.

As I entered the small schoolroom, I peered across a sea of faces, which to my eyes, and to my shame, all looked alike at the same time as looking unlike me. On entering the unknown I was searching subconsciously for something familiar, someone like myself.

> When we meet someone, the first thing we look at is their face. We look to see if we recognise the person, for clues to mood and character. In an instant we might detect a family resemblance or notice signs of embarrassment or ageing, of high blood pressure or a five-o’clock shadow. We do this instinctively and are very good at it. (Sturgis, 1998, 5)

To look is to communicate. To overcome shyness, I was looking for recognisable way-markers; something in the peoples’ faces that would mirror mine; something that would resonate with my own experiences; some point of connection from which I could begin. Visually I was searching for something that would attract. I was looking for that consideration of the human eye, for beauty. “C.S. Lewis, like Plato, and innumerable philosophers influenced by him down the ages, believed that the longing
aroused by beauty is a desire for what he called ‘our own far country…’” (Harries, 1993, 4)

In my desire to connect, all I saw were many marble dentures, smiling. I could not focus on anyone’s face, only on their teeth, the only parts, that, to my ingrained aesthetic and learned fears, did not communicate chaos and temporality, but spoke order and timelessness; like classical Greek statuary, white, pure, smooth. For some aesthetically long-rooted and deeply ageist reason, I had focussed on the symmetry of their smile as the only resonance between themselves and myself.

Ageism allows the younger generation to see older people as different from themselves: thus they suddenly cease to identify with their elders as human beings and thereby reduce their own dread of ageing. (Butler in Merchant, 2003, 6)

Ironically I had fastened upon the most unreal part of their physiognomies in order to begin to communicate. I looked into the face of the body of Christ and missed the expression.

All in an instant, before my panic subsided in warm welcome. Yet I remember my initial reaction with deep shame. I was there to know the body of Christ more intimately. I was on an errand of love, and love and beauty have gone together even before ancient Greek philosophers formulated their aesthetic. Yet I was looking at older people with learnt perception, and my eyes were deceiving me. As I spent time with them, I found, and still find, beauty beyond anything I have ever known.

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2 When Cadmus and Harmony married in Thebes, the Muses sang in their honour a song “…that was immediately picked up by the gods attending the ceremony” (Eco, 2004, 27) “Muses and Graces, Daughters of Zeus, who came of yore to the wedding of Cadmus and sang so fair a song ‘What is fair is dear, and not dear what is not fair’ – such was the song that passed your immortal lips” (Theognis in Edmonds, 1968, I, 231)
Christ’s physiognomy has come back into focus, as “…a gift of vision.” (Heywood & Sandwell, 1999, 186)

My wondering why I should find beauty in white and chiselled dentures rather than the attractive complexity of faces and forms that trace the vital storylines of experience, is the beginning of a story of a profound shift in perspective, a process of illumination, even revelation of the embodied beauty of age. It is a process …rooted in a searching reflection on the nature of human experience, shaped by response to Christian revelation and sustained by a living tradition…it is not driven by a desire to be fashionable or convenient. It is formed by a developing vision and experience of what is true and good and calls for a costly discipleship. (Shakespeare & Rayment, 2006, 12)

It is a process that challenges us as a culture of youth to contemplate our own ageing process, “…the task of including ‘the other’ even the unacknowledged ‘other’ within ourselves.” (ibid, 13) It is a depth challenge to our contemporary visual age in which, ironically “…no-one ever looks at anything at all: not so as to contemplate it, to apprehend what it is to be that thing and plumb it if he[sic] can, the deep fact of individual existence.” (Hedley, 2008, 25)

The gift of vision is a challenge, it is also an opportunity. But only… if we are prepared to root our looking and seeing in the body of feeling. For the root of vision is weeping, our vulnerability, our openness to being touched and moved by what we see. (Heywood & Sandwell, 1999, 186)

It is a shift in perspective providing a timely opportunity to point out to an ageing population, as we would a sunrise or a sudden rainbow, the wonder of its ageing self as wholly beautiful and in God’s image.
Skin deep? Tracing the roots of our contemporary western aesthetic

beauty n 1 = attractiveness, allure, bloom, charm, comeliness, elegance, exquisiteness, fairness, glamour, handsomeness, loveliness, pulchritude, seemliness, symmetry 2 = belle, charmer, cracker (sl.), goddess, goodlooker, humdinger (sl.), lovely (sl.), stunner (inf.), Venus 3 Informal = advantage, asset, attraction, benefit, blessing, boon, excellence, feature, good thing (The Times English Dictionary and Thesaurus, 2000)

Beauty n 1 = attractiveness, symmetry

I consider myself a visual person, living in a visual age with a specific and refined aesthetic, which influenced my initial shameful coffee morning reaction to other human beings and saturates life’s every moment. A newspaper article following actress Toyah Wilcox through the ideology and reality of plastic surgery highlights the way mass media sows, cultivates and gluts the market with a norm of youthful beauty, perfectly proportioned through the smooth blandness of lack of experience. We are so aesthetically sensitised, that anything jarring or marring smooth symmetry, is deemed unattractive and therefore unacceptable.

Her skin…has a surreal, luminous quality…and apart from some tiny lines when she smiles, her face is wrinkle-free. That slight turkey wattle…has disappeared, and her neck forms a perfect right angle with her pretty pointy chin…”What’s so fabulous” says Toyah…”is that I don’t feel so vulnerable. Before, it was like every bit of emotional baggage I’d ever experienced was etched on my face for all to see.”” (D’Souza, 2005, 21)

Toyah may celebrate the appearance of freedom from her past experiences, but in macrocosm ours is not a culture in a vacuum. The visual age may be a new age in its ability to mass produce images through photography, cinematography and computer graphics, but the concepts of beauty behind this explosion of imagery have influenced all ages. My perception of beauty now is influenced by thousands of years of
humanity expressing its ideas of what is beautiful. My consciousness is informed and moulded by contemporary culture, which has been informed and evolved through past epochs. My attraction to white sepulchral coffee morning smiles was informed by expressions of artists, poets and philosophers whose thoughts have shaped ideas which have been sown and taken root in the loam of collective Western consciousness. To understand why my contemporary notion of beauty is so white, perfect and ultimately ageist, I need to trace the history of these ideas.

While Umberto Eco states

> Beauty has never been absolute and immutable, but has taken on different aspects depending on the historical period and the country; and this does not hold only for physical beauty…but also for the beauty of God, or the saints, or ideas. (Eco, 2004, 14)

I aim to argue that, through all the differing ideas of beauty over the centuries, and culminating in this age of massive scale reproduction, inexorable repetition and blanket advertising, there are certain ideas that have become seemingly immutable. Eco presents comparative tables of beauty expressed in art through occidental history. There are differences in style, use of materials, perspective, proportions, but one similarity. Of all qualities associated with beauty, the most abiding is the attractiveness, allure, bloom, charm, comeliness, elegance, exquisiteness, fairness, glamour, handsomeness, loveliness, pulchritude, seemliness and symmetry of youth, and all the power invested in it. Of all the aesthetic rules over the centuries, the one that still holds fast is the voice of the gods. “Only that which is beautiful is loved, that which is not beautiful is not loved”.

This idea runs completely counter to Paul’s teaching on the body of Christ where
On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; (1 Corinthians, 12:22-23, my italics)

There is little wonder that I, with my learned perceptions of beauty, struggled to recognise the body of Christ in the coffee morning.

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3 JB Phillips’ paraphrase gives a challenging perspective “The parts which do not look beautiful have a deeper beauty in the work they do, while the parts which look beautiful may not at all be essential to life!” (Phillips, 1960, 81)
**Beauty** n 2 = belle, goddess, Venus

In 1Corinthians 12, Paul spoke his metaphor of the body of Christ into a context which not only resonates contemporary culture’s aesthetic of perfection, but is also, arguably, its original precursor. Biblical commentator Thiselton draws powerful, ironic parallels between Paul’s world and ours.

With today’s “post-modern” mood we may compare the self-sufficient, self-congratulatory culture of Corinth coupled with an obsession about peer-group prestige, success in competition, their devaluing of tradition and universals, and near contempt for those without standing in some chosen value system. All this provides an embarrassingly close model of a post-modern context for the gospel in our own times, even given the huge historical differences and distances in so many other respects. (Thiselton, 2000, 16, author’s italics)

Paul’s letter was written after he had lived for a considerable time among the Corinthians - a relatively young colony of Roman citizens, re-founded in 44 BC. He spoke into a dynamic, long-syncretised mix of Greek and Romans as well as Jews; to local elites, travellers and traders, many of whom were open to new ideas while seeking consolidation within the Roman Empire through the colony’s commercial power as a busy trading centre.\(^4\) In Corinth, Paul lodged with Priscilla and Aquila\(^5\), and worked among artisans in one of the commercial centres, which were specially designed to reflect a town in Ancient Greece. Rome’s rise had led to the inheritance of most of the Alexandrian Empire, but “…Rome itself was a hellenised or half-hellenised state.” (Browning, 1985, 168) The Romans had sacked Corinth in 156 BCE, but by that time Greek art had spread all over Europe. Its influence was seen everywhere in the arts and architecture of the new city, and in the Roman state

\(^4\) In 7BCE Strabo wrote “Corinth is called wealthy because of its commerce, since it is situated on the Isthmus and is master of two harbours, of which one leads straight to Asia, and the other to Italy; and it makes easy the exchange of merchandise from both countries” (Strabo, *Geography* 8.6.20 in Thiselton, 2000, 1)

concepts of love, power, justice and order, of which they were the visible form. Paul would have preached within buildings reflecting the perfect proportions of Greek columnar architecture; and uttering the unequivocal message that the Roman Empire was the new Athens, in all its epoch-making prowess, only more powerful, far-reaching, and longer-lasting. He would have expounded the gospel not only in the synagogue but also outside, surrounded by temples of Apollo, Aphrodite, Tyche, and the Imperial Cult, and in the shadow of the statue of the Greek goddess Athena

The set Classical features are calm and thoughtful, passionless. The artists...only rarely admitted nuances of expression or feeling. The idealised mortal is near-divine, self-sufficient and above ordinary passions. (Boardman, 1973, 120)

Even though Roman copyists, working in more durable marble, rather than bronze, added more emotion to their sculpture than their Greek forebears, Athena’s classical features could well have born a passing resemblance to Toyah. Indeed the whole form of the statue, probably full-frontal, relaxed and body gently curved, was an expression of the Greek, and now Roman, classical understanding of beauty. The enigmatic smile; the evenly serene and youthful features; the exact number and equal length of hair-braids; the precise folds of her loosely draped garments and in “…the appropriate measure and symmetry of the parts” (Eco, 2004, 41) the lofty, unreachable, but universally desirable perfection. In the Corinthian markets, alongside the tentmakers where Paul developed his relationships, were artisans commercially producing copies

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6 Appendix A1.
7 In his Lectures on Aesthetics, Hegel said of Greek classical artists “They fashion at their will the matter and the idea so as to draw from them figures free and original. All these heterogeneous or foreign elements they cast into the crucible of their imagination...Everything that is confused, material, impure, gross, disordered is consumed in the flame of their genius. Whence springs a pure and beautiful creation wherein the materials of which it has been formed are scarcely perceptible. In this respect their task consists in despoiling tradition of everything gross, symbolic, ugly, and deformed, and afterward bringing to light the precise idea which they wish to individualise and to represent under an appropriate form. This form is the human form.” (Hegel, 1820-29a, II,1b)
of female deities. There was a good market for the Venus de Milo\(^8\), and for
“…portrait heads of Roman matrons who would be flattered by the divine physique
attributed to them” (Boardman, 1973, 194)

Paul communicated the radical gospel to a dynamic and amorphous community
against the backdrop of personified deities with their “…calm but compelling
countenances.” (Browning, 1985, 147) The disturbing, intimate beauty of his
Christology clashes with the classical ideal of beauty reflecting the traditional order
and distance of the gods. Yet, the aesthetic he absorbed, observed and countered had
a human dimension.\(^9\) Greece’s unity had been affirmed through the famous games,
held every four years in honour of Zeus in the Pan-Hellenic Sanctuary of Olympia.
Now the close proximity of the Sanctuary of Poseidon at Isthmia, with its temple,
theatre and stadium, “…the scene of the Isthmian games, one of the four great Pan-
Hellenic festivals which was celebrated every two years in late spring” (Murphy-
O’Connor, 1997, 258) meant that marble male athletes posed naked among
imperturbable deities in Corinth’s streets and market places.

The remains of the Games held in AD 49 shortly before Paul’s
arrival in Corinth…and the huge crowds which came to Corinth
during the Games which took place while Paul was ministering
in Corinth (AD51), would have been a significant part of the
world of Corinth that Paul knew. (Thiselton, 2000, 10)

This celebratory statuary embodying the skilful strength, graceful power and victory
of Roman Empire, was also reflected in the city’s commercial networks profited
“…by all who had skills or bodily health and muscle to offer in a competitive

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\(^8\) Appendix A2.
\(^9\) “…man[sic] recognises himself in these creations, for what he produces outwardly is the most beautiful manifestation of himself[sic]” (Hegel, 1820-29a, II, Ib)
market.” (ibid, 11) However, true to the classical aesthetic, the beauty of athleticism still embodied the divine.

Man was the measure of all things...and the artist’s aim was to portray him at his idealised best; indistinguishable from the gods whom he conceived in man’s likeness. The heroic nudity of the gods, warriors and mortals shown by artists was a natural expression of the Greek’s open admiration for the perfectly developed male body. (Boardman, 1973, p.129)

As Hegel points out “…the artist also finds his image in the real world; but he must remove whatever of accidental or inappropriate they present [sic] before they can express the spiritual element of human nature, which, seized in its essence should represent the everlasting might of the gods.” (Hegel, 1820-29a, II, 1b) Paul possibly saw other sculptured forms. Images from the margins, the weak and powerless “…the bibulous old trot, as drained out as the decanter she holds, the hunchback dwarf, the emaciated fisherman…” (Browning, 1985, 148) but always in caricature, hinting at darkness and disharmony. Images reflecting the perfect power and unity of Rome, its prowess, order harmony and longevity, always revealed the symmetry of youth.

Apart, that is, from the statues of philosophers who were first to describe the visual world and whose ideas originally influenced and continued to commentate the youthful classical aesthetic. If Paul had encountered a statue of Socrates, a mosaic of Plato or a coin bearing Pythagoras’ image, he would have found himself in the company of older men and their wisdom. For the ancient Greeks, beauty was first a description rather than a concept, always “…associated with other qualities [such as] “moderation, harmony, symmetry and justice.”11 (Eco, 2004, 36) The Ancient Greek

10 Appendix A3.
11 ““The beautiful is the most just…” was the Delphic Oracle’s answer to the question what is beauty?” (Eco, 2004, 37) and according to Plotinus “Almost everyone declares that the symmetry of parts towards each other and towards a whole…constitutes the beauty recognised by the eye, that in visible
word for beauty is *kalon* “…the right, the fitting, the good, that which is appropriate to a being, that in virtue of which it possesses its health, its security.” (UrsVon Balthasar, 1982, 201) As a sense of the aesthetic developed in the minds of Greek philosophers, beauty was understood as attraction, a dynamic concept not simply embodied in the object of beauty, but needing the human eye to perceive it. Socrates was one of the first to approach beauty conceptually, and did so by compartmentalising it. Beauty could be ideal, representing “…nature by means of a montage of the parts”, or spiritual “…expressing the soul through the eye,” (Eco, 2004, 48) or purely functional. When asked by Aristippus whether beautiful things are all like each other, Socrates answers

…one man who is beautifully formed for wrestling, is unlike another who is beautifully formed for running: and a shield, which is beautifully formed for defence, is as unlike as possible as a dart, which is beautiful for being forcible and swiftly hurled. (Xenophon, 5-4BCE, III 8,4,5)

In 5-4 BCE, Plato followed with a more complex aesthetic, finding the words to link the object and the beholder, thus giving beauty form.

The beautiful object is an object that by virtue of its form delights the senses, especially sight and hearing. But those aspects perceivable with the senses are not the only factor that express the beauty of the object; in the case of the human body an important role is also played by the qualities of the soul and the personality, which are perceived by the mind’s eye more than the eye of the body. (Eco, 2004, 41)

Plato also invested the concept of beauty with the power to point beyond itself – to transcend the very form it inhabits…

…but what if man had eyes to see the true beauty – the divine beauty, I mean pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with things as indeed in all else, universally, the beautiful thing is essentially symmetrical”” (Plotinus, 250 BCE, Sixth Tractate in Eco, *ibid.*)

12 On a visit to Cleito’s workshop Socrates puts the question “…how do you put into your statues that which most attracts the beholders through the eye, the life-like appearance?” (Xenophon, Memorabilia III, X, 6)
the pollutions of mortality…thither looking and holding
converse with the true beauty, simple and divine? Remember
how in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of
the mind, he will be able to bring forth, not images of beauty,
but realities…and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue
to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may.
(Plato, 360 BCEc, 211,e)

For Plato, beauty is dialogue between subject and object, thus there is always a
division between observer and object; between divine idea of beauty and mortal object
of beauty; and between beholder’s mind’s eye and physical eye. Plato strengthens this
sense of division by arguing that beauty is splendour and as such is not simply in the
eye of the beholder, but autonomous and “…distinct from any physical medium that
accidentally expresses it; it is not therefore bound to any sensible object in particular,
but shines out everywhere.” (Eco 2004, 50) However, only those with intellectual
sight can perceive it.

For there is no light of justice or temperance or any of the
higher ideas which are precious to the souls in the earthly copies
of them: they are seen through a glass dimly; and there are few
who, going to the images, behold them in the realities and these
only with difficulty…Now he who is not newly initiated or has
become corrupted does not easily rise out of this world to the
sight of true beauty in the other. (Plato, 370 BCE, XXX)

Plato gives the cause for this division as the trauma of birth, snatching the soul away
from

…the forms which it beheld directly in a state of wholeness.
The now embodied soul sinks into the lower world of the ordinary,
everyday experience, always striving, through all its actions and
creations to regain access to the lost world of Ideal forms.
(Eco, 2004, 100)

These are held in the higher regions by the trinity of beauty, truth and goodness. The
smooth statues of Corinth tantalizingly attracted the viewer then pointed beyond their
perceived beauty to a greater and unattainable divine beauty.\(^{13}\) The way they held their garments, casting them off like some outer skin which has trapped the soul\(^{14}\), encapsulated the artist’s efforts to bridge the Platonic divide, to express what is and what never can be, unless the soul is released from the body “…which we carry around with us now, imprisoned like shellfish” (Plato, 2002, 34)\(^{15}\) Being a philosopher “…following in the train of Zeus” (Eco, 2004, 100) Plato felt privileged to perceive these upper regions and express the constitution of beauty, following the earlier ideas of Pythagoras who thought that the origin of all things lay in number. In Pythagoras’ understanding of creation, the Demiourgos creates the universe like a craftsman whose order out of chaos is a “…carefully planned geometrical act based on the harmonic intervals on a musical scale” (Pacteau, 1994, 79), linking mathematics with beauty and music. Pythagoras was the first to write about proportion in 6C BCE and his ideas on musical proportion run through antiquity, into the Middle Ages. Paul would have seen it in the architecture of Corinth where the proportions of the Ionic columns corresponded to “…the same ratios that govern musical instruments.” (Eco, 2004, 65)\(^{16}\) Also, on his way to his workshop Paul may have passed Roman copies of Greek Kore, a sculpture of a young handmaiden to the deities, celebrated by Pythagoras as beautiful as her limbs were “…arranged in correct and harmonious relation to one another, given that they are governed by the same law that governs the

\(^{13}\) Feminist Naomi Wolfe believes “…the West pretends that all ideals of ‘female’ beauty stem from one Platonic ideal woman” (Wolfe, 1990, 12) which is ironic as Plato’s Phaedrus was a dialectic involving divine beauty and a beautiful boy.

\(^{14}\) Appendix A4.

\(^{15}\) In the Corinthian streets or state buildings, Paul would not have encountered a representation of the philosopher Plotinus in any form. Five hundred years after Plato, Plotinus saw the extreme duality of the body as container for the soul as a reason for not being sculpted, arguing… “Is it not enough to carry about this image in which nature has enclosed us?” (Pacteau, 1994, 22)

\(^{16}\) Appendix A5.
distance between the planetary spheres.” (ibid, 73) Likewise, Plato surmised that God created on complex mathematical principles, arguing that

…the Demiourgos had set aside the smoothest triangles for the production of the mortal body [thus measure becomes] the defining principle of the good and the beautiful. Measure is the determination of appropriate relationships through knowledge of proportion and of the mean; it forms the ideal standard to which all creation that aspires to beauty must conform, and is the rational ground on which all beauty must rest. (Pacteau, 1994, 80)

The need to continually convey perfect proportions inspired artists Praxiteles, Polyclitus, and Lysippus, famous for his long-limbed athletes, to develop sets of dimensions, or canons, for the perfect body for others to study and follow. The very description of beauty, the choice and use of metaphors, had its own rules, “… physical attributes should invariably be described beginning from the head and working downwards; metaphors should be used only to refer to the noblest parts of the body – the upper part of the head and the breast and should be selected from a given, fixed repertoire.” (Pacteau, 1994, 26) Wherever Paul looked in Corinth, his eye would be smoothed by the proportion and symmetry of classical beauty, and drawn by a hierarchy beginning at the head, and working its selective way down. He was speaking to a people who had seen in this way for an epoch, informed and imbued by an aesthetic resonant with the harmonies of centuries of tightly constructed and interwoven ideology, cosmology and the power of global political and commercial domination.

17 Appendix A6.
18 In Timaeus Plato describes the world as a created body “…harmonized by proportion” and “…when all things were in disorder God created in each thing in relation to itself and all things in relation to each other, all the measures and harmonies which they could possibly receive.” (Plato, 360 BCed)
19 Lysippus “…introduced a new canon for the human figure, making heads smaller and legs longer; and he positioned limbs and head in such a way that, with more space being occupied in the third dimension, he statues present more than a single frontal view.” (Browning, 1985, 147)
Of the artist Policlitus, who sculpted the “Diademenus”, becoming known over subsequent centuries as “the Canon” because it embodied all the rules of correct proportion between the parts, Pliny the elder would write “…in the glory which he acquired by his works in marble [he] surpassed even himself.” (Pliny, AD77, 36.4) In the same century, in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul formulated his body metaphor to express a new canon, the shape and symmetry of a whole community united in Christian living and worship, a picture of Christ which Christ himself embodied. He did so at a time when the body was the visual form of the Roman Empire’s hierarchical power and political identity, and of the cosmically ordained order and harmony it brought over chaos, and in a way that could have torn apart centuries of interwoven aesthetic and destroyed the accepted order. Subversively, Paul used contemporary systems of thought and expression - a system created to be questioned but become tradition - the rhetorical questioning of philosophy, in order “…to make foolish the wisdom of the world” and create a new harmony and sense of identity.

As Paul forms the body of Christ metaphor, the opening sentences appear true to his contemporary aesthetic. He talks of one body that his audience would immediately

21 Later biblical scholars M.M. Mitchell and D. B. Martin perceive the body image “…not simply as a rhetoric of belonging, harmony and unity-in-diversity, but as a term or turn of phrase loaded with a political history [tracing] back the use of the term body as a rhetorical appeal for harmony and independence in political life from the fifth and fourth centuries BC (including Plato’s Republic) through to the first and second centuries AD (including Dio Chrysostom’s Orations).” (ibid, 992)
22 1 Corinthians 1:21, 2:6.
23 While drawing upon the arguments of modern historical criticism both old and new, ie christological and socio-political, my reading of Corinthians 12 which arranges these arguments into an aesthetic framework, has to be classified as reader response. Although I hope that in the future this pattern may become affirmed through the text itself, I cannot pretend to do this in the scope of this work.
associate with Pythagorean perfection of the odd number, and perhaps would be
already forming a mental socio-political picture of Christ as its head.  

Plutarch cites the interdependence and mutual benefit of the
Eyes, ears, hands and feet of the body…Epicletus speaks of the
mutual advantage…of the harmonious function of the whole
body. Mitchell notes that even in Dionysius Halicarnassus
(c 30 BC) personifications of parts of the body occur, as in
1 Cor 12:15-16…she concludes, ‘Paul’s uniformity of use of this
metaphor with ancient political writers applies even to the details’
(Thiselton, 2000, 992)  

Polyclitus, in “the Canon”, sculpted rules of correct proportion where “…the head was
to the body, as the body was to the legs and so on,” (Eco, 2004, 74) and Paul uses the
same idea of symmetry being in “…proper agreement between the members …and the
metric correspondence between the separate parts and the scheme as a whole.” (ibid)

The metaphor is mentally sculpted with a recognisable order, balance and beauty
through the interdependence of its parts. Then, in a radical inversion, starts, not with
the head, but the foot.  

Like Polyclitus’s canon “…the criterion…was organic, the
proportion of the parts were determined according to the movement of the body,
changes in perspective, and the adaptation of the figure in relation to the position of
the viewer.” (ibid) It was a system not only “…to construct a highly selective
representation, it was also to convey actual observation” (Pacteau, 1994, 27) and the
change of perspective Paul creates turns classical perception on its head.  

After centuries of ordered, symmetrical aesthetic, Paul, in an act of intellectual iconoclasm,
has toppled the visual idea of the body, or at least, shifted it on its axis and made it

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24 I Corinthians 12:12 and also because… “First then, the gods, imitating the spherical shape of the
universe, enclosed the two divine courses in a spherical body, that namely which we now term the
head, being the most divine part of us and the Lord of all that is in us. To this the gods, when they put
together the body, gave all the other members to be servants.” (Plato, 360BCEd)
25 Plutarch, Moralia, 478D; Chrysostom, Orations 1.32; 39.5. in Mitchell, M.M. (1992) Paul and the
Rhetoric of Reconciliation. Mohr, 159. Author’s own italics.
26 Vitruvius (1C AD) De Architectura 111.1.
27 I Corinthians 12:15.
of ideological redefinition as ‘code switching’.
dance. The Corinthians are challenged to open their eyes to a strange new movement.29

Alongside the many statues looking on, yet pointing beyond themselves to an unattainable perfect beauty only those with higher intellect could perceive, Paul goes on to develop an aesthetic of incarnation encapsulated by Christ’s Body which is attainable for all equally. Inclusion, rather than selection, is the new rule, with all the asymmetry that implies. Imperfections are not only spoken of in Paul’s canon, but also given special honour.30 Older, weaker, and marginalised people are no longer mere caricatures in opposition to perfection but part of the beautiful multiplicity of the whole.31 This interdependent community does not point implacably beyond itself to the divine, but embodies Christ at the heart of its dance where soul and body are no longer divided, but one. The body is no longer an imprisoning burden the individual circumscribed soul is doomed to carry through mortal life but the embraceable reality of God’s Kingdom on earth. Using Platonic measures, tools and materials, Paul crafts the vision of a whole new creation. Other rules are also broken. Classical statuary not only pointed to the implacable beyond, but also demanded in cold marble tones for the viewer to keep away.

For the Greeks [and thus Roman copyists] beauty was expressed by those senses that permit a distance to be maintained between the object and the observer; sight and hearing rather than touch, taste and smell. (Eco, 1994, 57)

29 Here, I could overlay a contemporary aesthetic and argue that Paul was being avante-garde - the way he challenged accepted perspectives was worthy of Picasso! Appendix A8.
30 1 Corinthians 12:23.
31 “When two opposites are in contrast to each other, only one of them represents perfection, the odd number, the straight line and the square are good and beautiful, the elements placed in opposition to them represent error, evil and disharmony” (Eco, 2004, 72, paraphrasing Pythagorus)
Paul’s Body of Christ is not to be contemplated from a distance, from one angle at a time, but to be wholly participated in, with all the challenge and change that implies. His dynamic canon is a “…system of contingent and flexible interdependence, in which novelty and gratuity are possible, and in which beauty is intelligible.”

(Williams, 1986, 21) Paul’s Body of Christ metaphor, which has become an ordered standard for centuries of Christians striving to live and grow together, is, at its conception, a challenge to the heart of what was arguably the most powerful and evolved world culture at that time. To a culture based on the rational enquiry into the nature of all things, expressed through strict rules of symmetry and proportion, and imbued with cosmic distance, the paradox of a divine body with an amorphous shape and vital warmth, interconnectedness and dynamic movement claimed an irrationality resonating with resurrection and new life in Christ. It represents and expresses a kairos moment, in a paradigm shift to a new religion, which was to bring freedom as well as confusion and condemnation. Paul’s metaphor embodied the paradox in which many of the Corinthian Christians lived. His first converts were often wealthy, with civic responsibilities, but many had once been slaves. They understood what it was like to be weak and marginalised as well as powerful. Christianity made sense of the ambiguity of their lives and

…at the same time introduced them into a society committed to looking at them primarily as people, all equally valuable and valued. It gave them the space in which they could flourish as people. (Murphy O’Connor, 1997, 27)

32 Paul develops his new aesthetic in his eschatological teaching, 1Corinthians 15: 35-58.
Beauty = 3 n Informal attraction, excellence

So, two millennia later, why did I still have problems envisaging and embracing the Body of Christ as a whole. Why did I still look for the perfection and miss the beauty? Why, have we, as a shifting culture, which has travelled through the door of Christendom and out through many other sides, and as a faith which still endures, not yet assimilated Paul’s whole new way of looking? Fischer, in “The Necessity of Art” provides a clue when he states that early Christians in late antiquity used old forms of expression for their faith’s new content. Although the first Christians feared that making pictures could be deemed idolatrous, they continued to create, despite their Mosaic law-based origins and

…made use of old pagan forms to express a new, no longer pagan content. Christian artists had to use old forms in order to present the new content in the most direct way possible, since these forms corresponded to familiar ways of seeing - and the prime concern of early Christians was to make the Christian message widely known, in order to create a whole new world. (Fischer, 1963, 142)

Although Paul’s message in his letter to the Corinthians offered a radical new way of seeing, it is clear from the cultural aesthetic which Christianity inherited and absorbed, that generations would have to come and go “…before a new form corresponding to a new content [would be] found, for new forms are not suddenly created, nor are they introduced by decree,” (ibid) that is, if they are to be found at all.

Constantine was the first Roman Emperor to embrace Christianity and in doing so kept the classical aesthetic alive, even as old deities crumbled. With an Emperor at its head, the new religion was soon speaking, in visual symbol, the classical language of youthful virility, victory and power.

Constantine’s conversion and the events emanating from it changed the legal impetus for conversion in the Roman Empire. From 313 Catholic Christianity moved from its status in the Edict of Milan - favoured equality among various religious
options - to its position in 392 of being the sole legal public cult, infractions of whose monopoly were punishable by swingeing penalties...Constantine and his successors gave with largesse to the churches what they had confiscated from pagan temples. (Kreider, 2001, 22, 23)

Symbols of the new religion were bound to be syncretic. Christianity, consolidated in this classical form, came to reflect the powerful status quo. “As the century progressed, the churches took on the trappings and iconography of the court…” (ibid 24) Alongside Greek Pagan art, symmetrical Christs stared implacably down from ceilings of cathedrals, statues of horsemen replaced those of javelin throwers, and the archaic Greek calf and ram-bearing youths became the Roman curly-haired good shepherd staring into a distant beyond and hoisting his lost sheep onto his perfectly proportioned shoulders.33

The classical canons of beauty were enduring alongside Paul’s teachings, splendidourously dulling the radical edges of his envisaged living as Christ’s Body. In the second century the philosopher Galen was still stating

Beauty does not lie in the individual elements, but in the proportion of one finger in relation to another, of all the fingers to the whole hand, of the rest of the hand to the wrist, of this last to the forearm and finally of all the parts to all the others, as is written in the canon Policlitus. (Galen in Eco, 2004, 75)34

Also, enduringly influential Augustine of Hippo, was reaching back to Pythagoras and Plato, stating “…beauty is the product of the unifying principle of ‘number’, ‘number’ here meaning at once mathematical proportion, rhythmic organisation and fittingness of parts, in both elements of the object and the faculties of the soul.” (Pacteau, 1994,

33 Appendix A9.
34 Galen. (2AD) Placita Hippocratis et Platonis, V3.
Augustine thought all geometric figures beautiful, especially the circle, and above all “...the beauty of the point, the indivisible centre, beginning and end of itself.” (ibid) If the Corinthian Body of Christ is viewed through Augustine’s neoplatonic symmetry-seeking eyes, proportion, balance and beauty is visible through interdependence, but the shape, as it becomes squeezed back into classical canon, is beginning to lose its three dimensional dynamic. There is less room for the less attractive parts, the weak, the unattractive and the imperfect in the overall aesthetic, they could become rough edges to be smoothed rather than essential parts of the beautiful whole.

Classical canons became less influential in mediaeval times. Thomas Aquinas in Summa Theologica expressed beauty in spiritual terms as a way of life, where the concept of light as clarity holds equal importance with symmetry as order.

> Beauty consists of a certain clarity and due proportion, and both derive from mind as source of light and order. So beauty is an essential feature of the contemplative life, which consists in activity of mind. (Aquinas, 1989, 451)

However, it would take historical disorder to find the expression of a completely new aesthetic. Fischer pinpoints the fourteenth century, with the breaking up of the feudal system and the rise of the peasant movement, when the Bible became a “...weapon against rulers of the world” (Fischer, 1963, 145) as the moment finally heralding new social content within art, producing “...new forms and means of expression.” (ibid) He traces the way Giotto’s Gothic frescoes humanise sacred themes through dramatic narrative rather than changeless images. Perhaps one could look to Giotto’s works as forms to express the Pauline aesthetic, as, with his Body of Christ metaphor, they

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…do not proclaim a rigid, immutable world. Everything is shown in movement, as encounter of men with other men[sic]…the story of Christ is told as something so tangible and near that the spectator seems invited to take part in it [the perspective of these forms are no longer two dimensional but] stand out …reach forward into space as though they were to cast off every bond and unite themselves with everyone living here and now. (ibid)36

Giotto, according to Fischer, had captured the sense of God’s kingdom as a story to be participated in, breathing life into the Body of Christ. However, by the Renaissance, when Christian and Western cultural expression of forms through art totally meshed, the changeless canon of Policlitus reasserted itself as beauty’s ideal.

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36 Appendix A10.
Beauty $n \ 3 =$ goddess, Venus

In order to paint a beautiful woman I would have to see several beautiful women… but since there are so few…I make use of a certain idea which comes into my mind. Whether it carries any excellence of art or not I do not know, but I work hard to achieve it. (Sturgis, 1998, 14)

Renaissance artist Raphael, writing to his friend Baldassare Castiglione, voiced his contemporary culture and religion, which perceived beauty neo-classically, as a certain idea to which mere humans could not pertain. It was a beauty which artists were ordained with the intellectual power and the creative skill to express. Artists honed these skills by studying and developing the perceived universal ideals of Hellenic and Roman forms and combining them with a new realism that celebrated the material human form - their “…‘Grand Theory’, according to which beauty consists in the proportion of the parts reached a high level of perfection.” (Eco, 2004, 216) They revisited classical canons, and, for accuracy, measured ancient statues and also the human body, realised there were differences and adjusted their formulations accordingly. Renaissance perception, like its forebears, began with the head, “…the ten-face length, the nine-face length and a shorter length, each to be related according to taste with specific gods, with the three styles of classical architecture, or with the categories of nobility, beauty and grace.” (Pacteau, 1994, 81) Different body types were identified and both Da Vinci and Alberti agreed that the different physical types were all interrelated. Da Vinci, in “The Notebooks” celebrated the human body as an ingenious creation.

Though human ingenuity may make various inventions answering by different machines to the same end, it will never

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37 The Renaissance with its confident self-expression was ushered in through the discovery of perspective in Italy, new painting techniques in Flanders and the rise of a new intellect based on neoplatonic thought.

devise an invention more beautiful, more simple, more direct
than does Nature, because in her inventions nothing is lacking,
nothing is superfluous. (Da Vinci, 1542-1519, 76)

Each limb, each organ, was designed to serve perfectly its particular purpose in the
service of the whole, and each movement was governed by unifying circular motion.
Could this give some hope that the Pauline aesthetic, with one body but many parts, is
still moving and breathing? Perhaps not. Leonardo looked to cadavers for his
aesthetic not the Living Word. Alberti dashed all hope when he wrote, “…perfect
beauty is distributed by nature…in fixed proportions among many bodies.” (Pacteau,
1994, 82)  The idea of classical perfection and fixed proportion remained
unchallenged.

Indeed, when Raphael told his friend, “…painting should attempt to reach beyond
‘mere’ reality, with its idiosyncrasies and accidents of appearances towards a
permanent ideal - a certain idea - the distilled essence of beauty” (Sturgis, 1998, 14)
he traces an ideological path straight to Plato. Vasari, who founded the earliest public
Academy of Art in Florence, wrote, in *Lives of the Artists*, of the importance of the
artist to reach beyond what he sees.

> He who has not drawn much or studied the choicest ancient and
> modern works [the latter being drawn directly from the ancient]
> cannot…improve the things that he studies from life, giving them
> grace and perfection in which art goes beyond the scope of nature.
> *(ibid, 15)*

In the aesthetic hierarchy the body is reduced once more to passively pointing beyond
itself to a higher realm, which the artist, like the ancient philosopher in the train of
Zeus, had the power to perceive and express. Or perhaps, like their contemporary,
neo-platonic philosopher Ficino, who reiterated the concept of beauty being the form
of attraction between the object and the one attracted to it. The object of desire is the beauty of God.

The splendour of God often shines out in single things and where it shines out most perfectly, it stimulates especially those who see that thing, arouses those who contemplate it, attracts and absorbs those who go near it, obliging them to worship a splendour of that kind above all others, as one would worship a divinity and finally to reach out only for those things which God may transform into splendour…(Ficino in Eco, 2004, 184)39

Surely from these thoughts it would only be a short step to understanding Paul’s body of Christ as alive and vital, glowing with the splendour of God and attracting and changing by its dynamic beauty, but that would be to miss Ficino’s implicit division between the object and the observer, the worshipped and the worshipper, a division which Paul had reconciled through his words “…you are the body of Christ.”40 Ficino continues to reopen and widen that division stating that “…the spirit is kindled in the handsome man as in the mirror and that, captured in unknown ways the spirit is - as it were hooked and transported on high, until it loses itself in God.” (Eco, 2004, 184)

There is no holistic participation here. In this renewal of a hierarchical aesthetic, the soul has become imprisoned in the platonist body once more. And, in a syncretic twist, which has influenced our perceptions ever since, it is the Greek goddess Venus who becomes the accepted ideal of beauty in this predominantly Christian time. For Ficino, she has a beauty which was “…not a quality springing from the proportion of the parts, [although these are implicit] but something that shone out all the more brightly the nearer it got to divine beauty.” (ibid) In the same year of writing Botticelli completed “Birth of Venus”41, the iconography of its statuesque young goddess stepping from her symmetrical carapace, a clear visual echo of Plato’s soul

39 Ficino, M. (1482) Platonica theologica XIV.
40 I Corinthians 12:27.
41 Appendix A11.
being released from the body like an oyster from its shell. Phaedrus’ beautiful boy is now joined by his sister. The dovetailing concepts of transcendence, female beauty and youth are also played out in Baldung-Grien’s interpretation of Venus who, with her classical marble-white complexion “…highlighted by the darkness of the background…alludes to a physical and material beauty made even more realistic by the imperfection [with respect to classical canons] of the form.”(Eco, 2004, 194)

For Eco this Venus marks the advent of a Renaissance woman confident in a beauty both real and transcendent. She turns her back on decay and death symbolised by Pythagorean oppositions of imperfection, ugliness and chaos, and only her own eternal symmetrical reflection can be seen in the mirror she holds. There is no room in her narcissistic worldview for any other beauty but ageless perfection. Indeed, there is urgency in her desire for beauty. With Cranach’s “The Judgement of Paris” the element of judgement appears in western culture.

Paris awards the apple to the woman he finds most beautiful. Thus beauty becomes competitive…those who are not judged beautiful are not beautiful (Berger, 1972, 55)

The power of and desire for beautiful form was not confined to females. In the final decade of fifteenth century Florence the statue “David” began its long formation from a marbled massif under the hands of Michelangelo. Through another Renaissance syncretism, this time patriarchal and political, David the Hebrew shepherd boy becomes a Colossus, a demigod reflecting the classical self-confidence of the time.

In ancient Greece the nude was a symbol of heroism; Michelangelo’s David combines the ideal image of humanity with the Renaissance sense of intellectual endeavour. David holds a sling in his hand, an acknowledgement of the supremacy of intelligence over brute
force, and a symbol of liberty. His face expresses the fierce assurance of youth that justice, and therefore truth will prevail whatever the odds, and that he will protect his people, (De Borchgrave, 1999, 115)

Michelangelo created his own canons of proportion to give his “David” symmetry, a standard also evident in his painting of the Sistine Chapel. Unlike the intimate narrative frescoes of Giotto; from the newly created Adam with the perfect proportions of a demigod through the muscle-bound silhouette of crucified Jesus to the image of Christ sitting in glory “…an all-conquering athlete with the face of Apollo” (ibid 118) Michelangelo captured both the lofty self-image of the age and set in classical timelessness humanity’s separation and unreachable distance from God.

The canon that was to emerge and re-emerge over the next centuries had been set. Tastes, proportions, and standpoints of perception may change but the standard of beauty that encapsulated the individual, the youthful, the healthily desirable and the unattainable was to remain. The eighteenth century “Age of Enlightenment”, with its renewed search for reason and measure, saw the rise of classicism once more. Nobility favoured it as an emblem of power. The idea of the new Athens again became fashionable “…in the dual sense of the Classical Greek city par excellence and the incarnation of the goddess of Reason.” (Eco, 2004, 244) Archaeologists began searches for antiquity and sculptor Canova adopted the cool untouchable Venus beauty of Renaissance and Roman copyists. In “The Three Graces” his transcendent trinity turn their backs on the observer and defer only to themselves. However, a new subjectivism in Enlightenment thought, seen in embryo in Renaissance

45 Appendix A15.
46 Appendix A16.
intellectualism, brought an important shift in perception, with beauty becoming situated in the eye of the beholder, “...the idea that Beauty is something that appears as such to the perceiver, that is bound up with his senses, the recognition of pleasure, was dominant in diverse philosophical circles.” (ibid, 277) Philosopher Hume writes

...beauty, like wit, cannot be defined but it is discerned only by taste or sensation...beauty is nothing but form, which produces pleasure, as deformity is a structure of parts which conveys pain. (Hume, 1954, Book II 32)

The splendour of beauty no longer emanates from form to attract and be recognised by the observer, or appears as dialogue between object and subject, but exists in the mind of the observer alone. However, the classical ideal was so ingrained by this time that the mind of the observer would impose learnt canons upon observed forms. The oyster shell had closed. Beauty may have been subjective, but it was still trapped in a rigid classical framework of perfect symmetry and youth.

The industrialised commercialism of the twentieth century saw another resurgence of classicism. As a new epoch was forming, firstly this time upon function, but taking in reason by its empiricism and then power in a more modern time of Empire building, beauty took on an utilitarian aesthetic.

In a world in which over and above its usual function, every object became goods...the aesthetic enjoyment of the beautiful object was transformed into a display of its commercial value” (Eco, 2004, 363)

The Art Nouveau movement, springing up simultaneously all over Europe, moved directly from the beauty of objects to the beauty of the body, often based on the classical youthful ideal. Wolfer’s Electric Lamp imitates a Greek Venus by
Praxiteles, more emancipated, slender and functional perhaps, but still casting off her outer layer to reveal her inner beauty.\(^{47}\)

As the totalitarian shadow moved inexorably across Europe in the 1930’s, the classic aesthetic of youth and strength prevailed but, chillingly, came to reflect another sort of epoch built upon subjugation, racial hatred and finally holocaust.

Fascist women must be physically healthy, to be able to become the mothers of healthy children…Drawings of female figures who have been artificially slimmed down and rendered masculine, representative of the barren woman of decadent western civilisation, must therefore be eliminated absolutely. (Eco, 372)\(^{48}\)

In Nazi Germany, when art became the servant of politics, classical form expressed idealised ideological content. An exhibition at the House of German Art in 1937 saw a renaissance of nudity in perfect proportions symbolising the heroic purity of the mystical Aryan race and the youthful countenance suffused with the intensity of Hitler’s view of justice and truth. Saliger’s disturbing reworking of Cranach’s “Judgement of Paris”, with the clothed Hitler youth as demigod searching for Aryan perfection, intimates the coming of the horrific Nazi selections of those judged to be of inferior race.\(^{49}\) There was to be not only marginalisation for those who do not fit the cultural canons, but torture and genocide, the polar opposite of Paul’s inclusive canon. Although it is true that the Nazi Regime produced not a single memorable artist or work, it remains an extreme example of how, through different epochs, the classical aesthetic always expresses the identity of times of great power, or times

\(^{47}\) Appendix A17.
\(^{48}\) The Prime Minister’s Press Office, Rome. (1931) *Drawings and photographs of women’s fashions.* 1931
\(^{49}\) Appendix A18.
aspiring to great power.\textsuperscript{50} With great power comes the fear of losing it. The sense of order and harmony that rigid rules of classicism bring provides security and affirms the status quo. Yet Fischer writes that in human social organisations “…always and everywhere, the form, structure or organisation that has already been attained offers resistance to the new - and everywhere the new content burst the confines of the old forms and creates new ones.” (Fischer, 1963, 125).

After every classical age there has been a counter-age when other forms rose to the surface that could have embraced Paul’s canon. Giotto’s Gothic following the Byzantine period as noted; the clothed and intense portraits of Mannerism after the nude implacable Renaissance; the Baroque and later pre-Raphaelites who were not afraid to look at decay and death, and therefore seemed more alive and whole; Hogarth who told stories through his paintings in the fading years of the age of Enlightenment; the avant-garde Cubists, Futurists and Expressionists who ignored all rigid barriers of perspective, went underground and survived totalitarian regimes to reflect the brokenness of two world wars. The mass production of art nouveau was a precursor to the mass production through the freeing of the image by photography and our contemporary culture is one of mass media. Looking around at the massive hoardings of classical beauty staring down like Christ from many Ravennas; the David body-types in magazines and on cinema screens; the cult of youth in body-centred MTV; the apotheosis of athleticism, particularly in football; the growing acceptance of plastic surgery, one can see reflected the identity and insecurity of

\textsuperscript{50} Hitler’s architect, Albert Speer had been commissioned to carry out the Fuhrer’s vision of a new Germany as the new Athens…”Both had a liking for neo-classical buildings on a monumental scale…He rapidly came to see [Speer] as the architect who could put his own grandiose building schemes, envisaged as the representation of Teutonic might and glory that would last for centuries, into practice.” (Kershaw, 2000, 35)
another powerful epoch, the fading paradigm of affluent, plural post-modern Western capitalist society.
**Beauty n 3 = Venus for sale**

For me, Greek art remains the pivot for all discussion on beauty …there is something magical in beauty, that is why crowds still file in front of the Venus de Milo, where she remains whole, where she remains untouched. (Masson, Pacteau, 85)\(^{51}\)

Eco argues that the first half of the twentieth century, including the nineteen sixties “…witnessed a dramatic struggle between the beauty of provocation and the beauty of consumption.” (Eco, 2004, 414) The avant-garde movement had flouted all classical rules, challenging the observer to interpret the world through different eyes, however, set against this is the beauty of consumption, which, imposed by media, in more than a faint echo of totalitarianism, conforms to all the classical canons that movement battled against. Mass media gives the impression of “…total democracy offering a model of beauty for those naturally endowed with aristocratic grace as well as for the voluptuous working girl” (*ibid*, 425) while retaining the impossibility of attainment.

Eco states that at first the models of beauty in the media resembled the models used in art with “…the languorous women who appeared in the ads of the 1920’s and 1930’s [being] reminiscent of the slender Beauty of the Art Nouveau and the Art Deco movements,” (*ibid*) but the gap between the beauty of provocation and consumption narrowed. Now, the “…mass media no longer present any unified model, any single ideal of beauty.” (*ibid*) However, I regard this as a view from above, or at least from the centre of contemporary culture. From where I stand, alongside older people who have been marginalised by perceptions shaped by that culture, I can trace the lines of the classical aesthetic in the beauty of consumption as becoming narrower and narrower as the eyes of the models who express it appear wider and wider; and, as photographic techniques become more refined, their skin becomes smoother and

smoother, and the expression of the contemporary aesthetic becomes younger and younger.

Images of [beauty] are reductive and stereotyped. At any moment there are a limited number of ‘beautiful faces’ (Wolfe, 1990, 50)

Contemporary mass media, with its ability to draw from global and historical forms, has fractured the ideals of beauty into a myriad pixellated pieces, but these are constantly formed and reformed into the classical mosaic of the single ideal of youth.

“In its total syncretic and absolute unstoppable polytheism of Beauty…” (Eco, 2004, 425) it is still Narcissus who gazes at his own youthful reflection. For, “…the belief in the aesthetic value of exact measurements did not die.” (Pacteau, 1994, 85) The human figures engraved onto the aluminium plaque attached to the antennae of the 1972 spacecraft, Pioneer 10, in order to show the undiscovered alien civilisations what sort of creatures created it, “…both derive in pose and detail from that idealised and basically unrealistic view of [humanity]…derived by the artists of Classical Greece.” (Boardman, 1973, 235) Western civilisation has so imbibed the ancient aesthetic that it is written into our conscious hopes for the future. Meanwhile, there is probably still as good a market for the Venus de Milo as there had ever been in Corinth!

Today, what began in Classical times as an explicitly elaborate theoretical and practical apparatus, has devolved into a set of fuzzy assumptions that pervade the everyday language of aesthetic appreciation of the body - particularly the feminine body. Such assumptions punctuate the pages of fashion and glamour magazines and linger in technical manuals of art practice and art history books. (Pacteau, 1994, 85)

Just as at the dawning of perspective the Greek painters invented fore-shortening to adapt an image for the point of view of the observer who sees it, now, in a simplified simulacrum the graphic designer uses air brushing techniques based on mathematical measures to change an image, to lengthen the leg to the proportion of an ionic column,

Appendix A19.
or to remove imperfections from the skin; all in a neo-platonic aim to attract and stimulate desire in the observer. The self-perpetuating desire of the media to create through its beauties, that desire in the observer, which cannot be attained, echoes and re-echoes through past epochs to antiquity and back. Even the artists who continue to work in avant-garde ways to challenge our perceptions are now, on the whole, young.

Contemporary culture has been in a new renaissance for a considerable time. Ours has been a powerful culture struggling to retain its status quo in a world of flux and change, and, like the Renaissance that was “…incapable of settling down into an equilibrium that was not fragile and transient,” (Eco, 2004, 196) the timeless classical ideals have allowed for a sense of security. For, just as in the Renaissance, we are “…pervaded by a sense of anxiety that [will] have repercussions on all material and spiritual aspects of life.” (ibid) The ‘perfect’ image of youth, an assured static Colossus symbolising order and staring out chaos, or a statuesque Venus, turning its back on death and smiling transfixed at her own reflection, remains the one certainty against the melting iceberg-flow of post-modern thought; the breaking down of global and social barriers by the internet; the rise of virtual reality, plural societies, the movement of peoples, pandemic violence, the fragility of ageing earth and global economic collapse. Now, with the current chaos of European market forces, youth might well become the only currency of any perceived value. So in our anxiety and uncertainty we search for our identities in the classical beauty of the marble smile. It is a tragic irony that such a rigid aesthetic produces such an unreachable, untouchable beauty, yet the media fuels the illusion that it can be reached by telling stories of people giving up their bodies for Renaissance-like dissection in a bid to attain it. And those who do not or cannot fit into this rigid canon of youthful beauty
become increasingly marginalised, untouchable in a different way. In our striving for perfection as an intrinsic potentiality, we have learned to look for symmetry, harmony, order, health, success, power, and where there could be a falling into chaos, we turn away and continue to look for perfection elsewhere. And, when we measure ourselves against the unattainable cultural norm and find ourselves unbeautiful, we turn away from ourselves. Even though this beauty is, ultimately, an illusion. Pacteau describes the central hall of the Tour de Maubergeon, which is built according to the most perfect classical mathematical ratio, the ‘Golden Mean’. If one stands in a certain place at midday, no shadow is cast. She argues “…this achievement of perfect beauty entails the loss of corporeal subjectivity in the purely formal play of mathematical ratios.” (Pacteau, 1994, 95) It is a beauty which does not cast a shadow, a beauty where there is ultimately nothing to see. Likewise the beauty of youth offered by the media has become so rigid and measured that it offers nothing to see but the intuition of the cultural psyche, yet it renders all other types of beauty invisible. Pacteau also states that the word integrity comes from integer, which is Latin for intact, and teg is the root of tangere, meaning to touch. Those who subscribe to this unreal untouchable beauty in their search for identity and security could be robbing themselves and others of their integrity, that wholeness which is at the heart of Paul’s aesthetic. It seems that no real, new or sustainable forms have yet been found to match and express the integrity of its inclusive, life-affirming content. Ironically, Paul’s Body of Christ, which was a new creation, in one of the early great paradigm shifts, continues to be viewed from history through eyes seeking platonic perfection, symmetry and youth. It still has not cast its shadow and is still asking to be recognised as a kairos moment. In our uber-neoclassical culture, Paul still challenges us to be counter-cultural.
**Conclusion:**  Beauty = *n* terra incognita

In order to understand and live by Paul’s aesthetic we need to look for other forms of beauty that would express its counter-cultural content, forms that cast a shadow and defy the quantifying of mathematical measurement. This is a real challenge in a world so brightly suffused and subjugated by classical perception, where even the only systematic theological aesthetic, as developed by Urs Von Balthasar in the middle of the last century, looks back wistfully to the ancient world for inspiration.\(^{53}\) However, although the classical aesthetic came to symbolise status quo, it originally stood for epochal changes of perception, which is surely why Paul was able to use it so powerfully. Plato had remarked in the Sophist “…sculptors did not respect proportions in a mathematical way, but adapted them to the requirements of vision, to the standpoint from which the figure was viewed.” (Eco, 2004, 75)\(^{54}\) So, together with Enlightenment’s subjective view of beauty being in the eye of the beholder, we can start from the standpoint that perspective is all. This is *eurhythmy*, “…the adaptation of proportions to the requirements of sight” (*ibid*), a term coined by Vitruvius in the first century AD, and employed by Paul. In a world that increasingly marginalises those who do not fit into the canon of classical beauty, our requirement of sight is a total change of perspective. And if we change our perspective on what is beautiful, all sorts of other forms will come into view. New ways of seeing could evolve where, in Pauline terms, the whole of the body is beautiful.

\(^{53}\) “Beauty is the word that shall be our first. Beauty is the last thing which the thinking intellect dares to approach, since it only dances as an uncontained splendour around the double constellation of the true and the good and their inseparable relation to each other. Beauty is the disinterested one, without which the ancient world refused to understand itself, a world which both imperceptibly and yet unmistakably has bid farewell to our own new world, a world of interests, leaving it to its own avarice” (Urs Von Balthasar, 1982, 18)

\(^{54}\) “…in works either of sculpture or painting…there is a certain degree of deception;— for if artists were to give the true proportions of their fair works, the upper part, which is farther off, would appear to be out of proportion with the lower, which is nearer, and so they give up the truth in their images and only make the proportions which appear to be beautiful, disregarding the real ones.” (Plato, 360Ee, XXIII)
Age shallow: a cultural analysis of ageism

A coming of age.

At a college reunion I was intrigued when a friend’s responded to my explanation of my research. “Perhaps you will be able to tell me why I am becoming invisible”, she said, resonating with my own experiences of ageing, and highlighting a paradox. Our shared sense of disappearing with age provides a dramatic counterpoint to a vision of 2060 described in “The Observer” article, “Living with Britain’s population time-bomb”, picturing

…Britain, with its population of 100 year olds approaching half a million, royal congratulations to centenarians have long been abandoned because the number of recipients threatens to overwhelm Buckingham Palace. The greeting cards industry has never had it so good while Saga magazine - now renamed Just Seventy - vastly outsells lads’ magazines like Loaded and FHM. (McKie, 2004, 9)

How could we feel increasingly invisible at a time when “Of all the people in the world who have ever lived beyond sixty-five, half of them are alive today…” (Hacker, Knox, 2002, 25)

The shape of the West’s demography has been changing dramatically over the last century

…when the twentieth century began only one person in seventy six was aged seventy five and over. As it ended, it is one person in fifteen.” (Methodist Homes for the Aged, 1999,1)

Now there is no doubt that the “…trend towards an aging population is accelerating and will change society…by 2041, more than 20 million people will be over 60 - or 37% of the population” (Age Concern, 2005, 9)

56 “Similarly, the number of people aged 80 years or over is projected to almost triple from 21.8 million in 2008 to 61.4 million in 2060.” (Giannakouris, 2008, 1)
The Observer article is accompanied by a photograph of crowds of smiling older people, who will become more visible, surely, simply by dint of sheer numbers. Yet, however humorous and engaging the author’s vision, the language used to clothe the demographics reveals a different story. By stating “…researchers now believe our nation has begun to fade to grey” (McKie, 2004, 9) the author sets the tone for an article that, in my opinion, typifies prevalent negative attitudes towards ageing. Gerontologist Bond, describing contemporary ageism, argues that “…we live in a world in which everyday classificatory schemes and images are taken-for-granted forms of knowledge …black/white, young/old, function as guides to help us know how to act and feel.” (Bond, 1993, 307) In our colourful, fast-paced society, using the colour grey to generalise older people can be a “…form of symbolic stigmatisation which finds its way through to practical everyday action, thereby giving meaning (often negative) to the experience of growing old.” (ibid, 308) In a children’s book on colour, Reid sums up the fear expressed through such stigmatisation. “In many ways grey can dull the senses and drain the feelings…too much exposure to grey can lead to self doubt and uncertainty.” (Reid, 1998, 23) By choosing grey as his language palette’s dominant colour McKie is clear in his classification of older people. “In the symbolism of ageism, grey is the shadow colour, fading in the bright light of society onto the periphery of our vision…” (Holmes, 2002, 23) My friend had correctly described her ageing process in the context of a culture that fears ageing. I aim to present a cultural analysis that traces this fear as the basis of ageism. As Observer writer Gerard states

We turn away from those who are old because they remind us of where we are going. Nothing more certain. What name do we

57 Appendix B1
58 ‘Fade to grey’ is the title of New Romantic Steve Strange’s 1980’s pop song, thus gaining the attention of baby boomer readers.
use? The old. The aged. The elderly. The greying population. Them not us…If you turn the pages of a glossy magazine or switch on the television it can seem that the old are erased and only the gleaming young are present. (Gerard, 2001, 22)

We, who have learnt to value ourselves, and others, firstly by our appearances, are now beginning to feel invisible because our image-centred society no longer wants to look.

McKie’s article is fluent in the internalised language of fear, a whole lexicon of ageism, filled with “…stereotyping, perceived negativity, homogeneity, expectation of differences, ridicule, out-grouping.” (Greenberg et al, 2002, 27) The only people actually named in his piece are those who are ‘in power’: financially, politically, culturally, intellectually, legally and socially. Older people remain a nameless, threatening mass. Demographic change also is not only a cultural revolution, but an “age quake…about to overwhelm us…” (Mckie, 2004, 23) intimating a disaster of seismic proportions that we will never recover from. In his vision of centenarians threatening, “…to overwhelm Buckingham Palace” (ibid) he is auguring anarchy. The patronising picture of “golden oldies on the march” and a “regiment of twelve million oldsters” (ibid) describes a war to be fought against as well as a disaster to flee from. With his delightful turn of phrase, “swelling ranks of oldies” fusing images of disaster, war, obesity and even pestilence, he institutionalises fear. Things can only get worse, with middle-aged people worn down with the double burdens of supporting their children and their parents and with immigration the only solution to filling the work vacuum. His writing reveals the ease to which fear-intrinsic ageism can be used to exacerbate other forms of prejudice and his is not a fleeting voice in the wilderness. In 2009 the BMJ conducted a “Retrospective analysis of attitudes of ageing in the
Economist: apocalyptic demography for opinion formers” (BMJ, 2009,1) concluding that

Most articles…showed a predominantly ageist view of older people as a burden to society, often portraying them as frail-non-contributors. Recurrent themes include pension and demographic “time-bombs” and future unsustainable costs of health care for older people…This negative view of older people might be influential in shaping the attitudes of readers, who are opinion formers in politics and economic circles (ibid)^59

We are all ageing,

…our lives are defined by ageing: the ages at which we can learn to drive, vote, have sex, buy a house or retire, get a pension, travel by bus for free. More subtle are the implicit boundaries that curtail our lives; the ‘safe’ age to have children, the ‘experience’ needed to fill the boss’s role, the physical strength needed for some jobs. (Age concern, 2005, 2)

Noticing a person’s age is not inherently offensive. In fact, from the point of view of one who is becoming invisible, it has affirming potential. But “…it is what we do with that information that can be destructive.” (Cuddy & Fiske, 2002, 3) Towards the end of the last century, social scientists agreed that ageism exists and has done since the beginning of consciousness. Various models have been produced to outline its shape and effects, but it is agreed “…the problem that ageism poses for society increases in seriousness with the depth of its institutional creep.” (Braithwaite, 2002, 311) Individual stereotyping expressed in ageist language leads to prejudice, discrimination and stigmatisation, which lead to social, then institutional oppression, which then become society’s norm. This is the process I aim to outline.

Ageism has attracted little research compared to gender and race issues. Also, as McKie shows, its’ manifestations go “…largely unchallenged …we disparage older

^59 Of 6306 identified articles they found 262 relevant, 64% of which portrayed population ageing as a burden, with 12% viewing it as of benefit, and 24% had a balanced view.
people without fear of censure.” (Cuddy & Fiske, 2002, 3) Thus I will need to be creative and search widely. Because ageism is so internalised, thus unnoticed and unchallenged, because it is itself invisible, it becomes easy to argue against its existence. One could argue that, since the 1980’s, there has been much progress in age relations in the West. In the United States older people’s rights at work and in health care are being fought for. In the United Kingdom their equal rights have now been recognised by Parliament. With the maturation of the ‘baby boomer’ generation comes the general realisation that old age can be a productively positive time. From friends and relatives I hear the intonations, “we’ve never had it so good”, “we are looking forward to our retirement, and we doing everything we can to make sure we are fit and healthy enough to enjoy it.” As they retire, they bring “…a model for prosperity and fulfilment in one’s later years [offering] a positive perspective on the ageing process.” (Kite & Smith Wagner, 2002, 129) This new model, however, depends on staying “forever young”.60 The boomer generation has no intention of ageing like their parents, they would rather mirror the superseding Generation X.61 As people stay alive for longer in a world where ageism goes unchallenged, the very old could become marginalised by the not so very old.

Systematic researchers have concluded that “…ageism is a primitive disease, and unfortunately our fears about ageing are so deep that ageism will probably never totally disappear” (Butler, 1969, *ibid*)62. Age Concern63 recently completed Britain’s first national survey regarding age-related prejudice, finding that

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60 Appendix B2.
63 Age Concern merged with Help the Aged in April 2009 to form Age Uk.
More people (29%) reported suffering age discrimination than any other form. From age 55 onwards people were nearly twice as likely to have experienced age prejudice than any other form of discrimination. Nearly 30% of people believed there is more prejudice against the old[sic] than five years ago, and that this will continue to get worse…One in three respondents say the over 70’s are viewed as incompetent and incapable. (Age Concern, 2005, 3)

Rather than perceiving older people themselves as the worrying factor, therefore disappearing them, Age Concern recognises that urgent action needs to be taken in making ageism itself visible and acting against it.

McKie’s article reveals that ageism is rapidly becoming a twenty-first century norm. As I age, I can make a choice in response. I can become a cultural chameleon, embrace the norm and receive my cloak of invisibility unquestioningly, then use it, as a mirrored tabula rasa to catch all the forms and colours of youth’s over-arching rainbow, thus remain invisible. Or I can find my own true form and colour by joining with others who are passionate about making age visible in an image-conscious world.64 Part of that process is the unmasking of ageism, through the understanding of its roots, shape, and the fertile contemporary culture in which it grows.

64 It is encouraging that Newcastle University has launched “Changing Age’ a major campaign that calls for a fundamental change in the way society thinks about our ageing population…the Newcastle Charter for Changing Age…calls upon everyone, the public, organisations and politicians, to support the campaign, in order to create a society in which people of all ages can live their lives to their fullest potential.” (Newcastle University, 2010)
Growing Ageism: A model for understanding

Ageism is a complex phenomenon, “…a myriad of social, cultural, biological and psychological forces converge to shape it” (Wilkinson & Ferraro, 2002, 345) correlating with the complexity of ageing itself. “In no one thing do people differ more than in their ageing…” (Gullette, 2004, 24) Indeed, when the Age Concern survey asked the question “what is the meaning of old?” the answers were characterised by their variability.

We all disagree on when youth ends and old age begins. Our opinions are formed by our gender…our experience and…how old we are when asked the question. (Age Concern, 2005, 4)

Ageing, as a human condition, is multifarious, but its sheer variety does not stop age divisions appearing and hardening within society, “…because there is no magical date when one becomes officially old, it does not mean there is no such thing as age prejudice.” (ibid) Indeed, ageism is now becoming studied, at least in the States, across many different disciplines, all of which respect the depth of its roots.65 Of the many models attempting to explain ageism, the traditional tripartite model, is perhaps easiest to understand. It embraces the idea of ageism’s institutional creep and provides a place from which to trace the roots. McCann (McCann, 2002) writing about age and the workplace, describes ageism as having deeply rooted “affective components” with regards to an individual’s feelings about aging and older people; “cognitive components”, learnt beliefs in the form of stereotypes, which manifest themselves from these feelings, and “behavioural components”, the ways we treat other people on the basis of our feelings and learnt beliefs. (McCann, 2002, 129)

65 The discipline of theology was conspicuous by its absence in the list provided by Gullette, thus my method of understanding ageism within culture is an interface with social sciences.
1. The affective component: what we are

*Fade far away, dissolve and quite forget*
*What thou among the leaves hast never known,*
The weariness, the fever and the fret
*Here where men sit and hear each other groan;*
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
*Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin and dies;*
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
*Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,*
Or new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow.

Ode to a Nightingale (Keats, 2007, 463)

*Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say “I have no pleasure in them”...Vanity of vanities says the Teacher; all is vanity*

Ecclesiastes 12: 1-8

Daphne Merkin, in her Sunday Telegraph article “Face and Fortune”, a contemporary view on ageing, hits the emotional nail firmly on the head

It all goes back to that...as simple a fact of life as it is profound: the dying of the light that leads to the pitch-darkness at the end of the tunnel. Out, out brief flame. ‘Ageing...is nature’s way of preparing us for death. That’s why we hate old people.
(Merkin, 2005, 48)

Her way of dealing with this fear, plastic surgery to flesh out “youth’s pale thin dying spectre”, to paraphrase Keats, is relatively new, but the knowledge of death and the emotions surrounding that, are as old as our dawning awareness of the process of decay. This awareness “…makes us unique as a species in our potential for anxiety.”

(Greenberg et al, 2002, 32) Greenburg takes the argument of cultural anthropologist Becker, that, at the base of human consciousness is the animal instinct to survive by either flying from, or fighting off danger. He then uses this argument to describe ageism in terms of a giant existential panic attack. Even in basic terms…

Death by lion, boulder or even evil spirit can be avoided, but death as natural consequence of the ageing process to which
we are all subject makes death a permanent unavoidable constant which burdens us psychologically like nothing else. \( \textit{ibid}, 30 \)

From Ecclesiastes to Keats, from Cicero\(^{66} \) to T. S. Eliot\(^{67} \), voices and images from every age echo back - older people remind us that we die. There is nothing in life, that we can achieve that will be perfectly finished; there is no success that is not circumscribed, no beauty we can ascribe to, no stage we inhabit, no drama we take part in that will ultimately be about us; in the end we must leave all our endeavours.

Older people show us that we all age and

The elderly[\textit{sic}] person lacking health or meaning may be particularly threatening...physical problems concerned with aging...may serve as vivid reminders of our animal and therefore mortal nature, something we spend much or our lives denying. (Kite & Johnson, 2002, 41)

Thus, our survival instincts overcome our rational and transcendent thought and we either flee from older people, physically distancing ourselves through avoidance; or we fight them, projecting our powerlessness, our incompetence, and our ‘less than perfection’ back onto older people as a nameless group, which then becomes our adversary. Because of our ancient instinct for survival, we are hard-wired to fear ageing and death. This, however, is a reductionist argument. Tracing back ageism to an anthropological root source may help us to understand the depths of such prejudice and discrimination, but thankfully the human condition is so much more than a bundle of emotions barbed-wire-tied with fear. We can use rational and transcendent thought, imagination and experience, faith, tradition, anything which calls upon our sense of common humanity, also innate, to put our sense of self-preservation into better perspective.

\(^{66}\) “Life’s course is invariable – nature has one path only, and you cannot travel along it more than once.” (Cicero, 44BCE, X, 33)

\(^{67}\) “Ash on an old man’s sleeve
Is all the ash the burnt roses leave.
(Eliot, Four quartets, Little Gidding II, 1963, 216)
We are concerned about our future and our fate, and so it would be a mistake not to try and understand better the elderly\textit{sic} for whom death is the most likely closest...and to understand better ourselves and our own fearful yet natural responses to aging and death. Imagine the benefits if we could all value, cherish and emulate the wisdom and strength of the elderly\textit{sic} in dealing with something that, to our detriment as well as theirs, we try so hard to deny. \textit{(ibid, 45)}

“Perfect love casts out fear;” says the writer of the first letter of John.\textsuperscript{68} However, rational and transcendent thought, imagination, faith and tradition are also undergoing change. To challenge ageism will mean understanding the very nature of the cultural soil in which it grows like bindweed today.

\textbf{Mapping the affective component within Culture}

However deep the affective component is buried within the individual, the individual does not breathe in a vacuum. All our attitudes feed into and are fed by culture, the “...historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, [the] system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men\textit{sic} communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.” (Geertz, 1993, 89) The roots of ageism can also be traced horizontally in the ways that culture has reshaped its patterns over the last few centuries. Through their modernisation theory, Cuddy and Fiske argue that this evolution has led to a reduction in social status for older people:

\begin{itemize}
\item 1. The move from an agrarian to a largely urban industrial society meant better health conditions thus longer life for many older people. However, increased longevity resulted in retirement becoming institutionalised,
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{68} 1John 4:18.
“…older people no longer hold prestigious jobs or possess as much financial muscle as they once did.” (Cuddy & Fiske, 2002, 13)

2. Along with a shift in public education to the literate majority
   “…effectively eliminating the elder’s long-held position as transmitter of cultural knowledge and wisdom” (ibid) there has been a massive technological evolution leading to tectonic shifts in employment, causing great rifts in knowledge and expertise, which many older people are unable or have no desire to cross.

3. Urbanisation led to population shifts and breakdown of communities “…as a result we no longer seek out our grandparents and great grandparents for wisdom and guidance.” (ibid).

4. The rise of the beauty industry echoes the above as “…modern woman is taught to dismiss her own mother’s teaching about beauty, adornment and seduction, since her mother has failed - she is ageing” (Wolfe, 1990, 74)

5. Gerontologists Butler, Lewis and Sutherland highlight “…medical advances that have relegated most deaths to later life, producing a tendency to associate death with old age.” (Cuddy & Fiske, 2002,13)

6. There has been a general devaluation of tradition in nations “…founded on principles of individualism, independence and autonomy.”

(Tupper, 1995, 1)

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69 “As soon as some people reach 60 or 65, they think ‘Oh, I’ve retired now’…they think old instead of getting on with it…” (Janice aged 94 in Moss, 2006, 6)

70 While the rapidly expanding University of the Third Age adds social capital to communities, the lessening correlation between older people and wisdom has extrapolated into a belief in the irrelevance of mainstream education for the third and fourth age. Age UK has been given government funds to develop the educational capital of ‘older people’ but only to give them enough confidence to go back to work, thus the age range targeted is between 45 and 65.

71 A 2010 advertising campaign for Garnier Nutrisse Hair colour inverts tradition when Davina McCall plays the daughter advising her mother on her hair colour.
7. The growing phenomenon of secularisation\(^{72}\) alongside the post-modern shift from traditional Christendom, through a sense of a global society and thus religious plurality, to an open-ended spirituality where many different “spiritual beliefs and practices are being appreciated by and gradually absorbed into mainstream Western society” (Partridge, 2005, 5) and happening before the break up of traditional theology has been properly assimilated.\(^{73}\) As a group, older people and traditional religion are simply perceived as a correlate.

8. Developments in private and public transport create a fast-paced society placing high value on freedom of movement. The social status of older people with mobility problems is thus increasingly reduced.\(^{74}\)

The very society the present generation of older people were instrumental in shaping, a society of progress and rapid change, has evolved into a culture so fast-paced it appears to have outrun them. Older people are quickly categorised as representing society’s past endeavours, and can be rejected merely as ‘old’ in a culture of ‘new’.

\[\text{…we are constantly urged to turn back on anything traditional, to reject roots of any kind…we have been told so many times that we have become convinced that new technology blows away old ways of doing things. (Boyle, 2004, 121)}\]

Gullette calls this phenomenon “speed up” (Gullette, 2004, 29) and argues that, while time pressure has most likely been felt since the Industrial Revolution, now it is the

\(^{72}\) Partridge (Professor of Contemporary Religion, University College, Chester) sums up the secularisation process, “…modernisation leads to religious decline, both in society and in the human mind…not only do people stop attending places of worship and organising society according to broadly religious convictions, but they no longer think from a religious perspective anymore” (Partridge, 2005, 2)

\(^{73}\) The Second World War and the Holocaust caused a theological earthquake within systematic thought and became a catalyst for the growth of different theological strands such as liberation, feminism and process.

\(^{74}\) “In western society freedom of movement symbolises power, and speed of movement symbolises the power ideal…socially and economically it underlines the stark contrasts between older people and the rest of society” (Holmes, 2002, 6, 9)
stress that underlies all productivity and success. The feeling that everything should have been done yesterday stalks us alongside the desperate searching for more natural rhythms. From an early age results, targets, deadlines, time plans compartmentalise life, with other, deeper, divisions opening up.

...loss of Sundays, hobbies, family time...speed up divides overworked more markedly from the retired...Ageism may be an ancient prejudice but middle-ageism is our own post-modern toxin...people are rushed through their lives to suffer longer, competent and energetic, from constructed gerontophobia. (ibid)

Poet Robert Bly sees modern culture as an adolescent who, through the rejection of parental authority, wisdom and tradition, has lost the ability to grow up. He too describes a culture defined by speed and points to a paradox at its heart. We live in a time of

...social primitivism [where] people seek a new identity by plunging into ceaseless action and hustling. It takes leisure to mature. People in a hurry can neither grow nor decay; they are preserved in a state of perpetual puerility (Bly, 1996, viii)

The faster life is, the more stagnant it becomes. Bly sees life’s natural processes of growth and decay as positive and necessary forces in the whole and healthy development of individuals and communities. A culture that does not embrace them, but rather finds its identity through carpe diem becomes trapped by a reductionist view of time where “…the past and the future are compressed into the present moment.” (Goodliffe, 2005, 1) Instead of growing into a sense of responsibility for the preservation of community, as expressed through traditional values and religion...

...today’s adolescent by contrast, wants his or her needs gratified now...impulse is given its way. People don’t bother to grow up...the sibling society has lost so much of its ability to see mythologically that both sons and daughters wander in a flat landscape...They do not become mature because they do not become lined up with their ancestors. They can’t figure out how

75 Often this is through ‘new’ or popular spiritualities that, although rooted in ancient practices, are absorbed by a body-centred society as medical practices.
to look downward to depth or upward to the divine. (Bly, 1996, 86)

If there is no understanding of the deep and long processes of development and decay, we die without knowing, because we age without knowing. If we do not mature, we live a half-life. One could argue that this critique is simply a different kind of ageism, the older person’s diatribe against the culture of youth. However, author Lionel Shriver who calls contemporary culture “Be Here Now” paints her adult self into the picture and adds a few perspectives of her own.

Baby boomers and their offspring have shifted emphasis from the communal to the individual, from the future to the present, from virtue to personal satisfaction. Increasingly secular, we pledge allegiance to lower-case gods of our private devising…We give little thought to the perpetuation of lineage, culture or nation; we take our heritage for granted. We are a-historical…We will assess the success of our lives in accordance not with whether they were righteous, but with whether they were interesting and fun. (Shriver, 2005, 41)

The roots of ageism are thrust deep into the human psyche yet they also grow out in complex systems in today’s shallow soil. I would argue that even the emerging or evolving spiritualities, which by their very nature have potential for the dynamic of growth and depth of society, are in danger of being marketed-flat and consumed by hungry contemporary culture. For the self-centred society dedicated to neither growing old nor growing up there is separation of depth from surface, of memory from form, of meaning from image and a rejection of all the former for illusory reflected surfaces. “In no other form of society in history has there been such a concentration of images, such a density of visual images…” (Berger, 1972, 129) In an
image-conscious culture, cognition and perception dovetail. To paraphrase René Descartes’ “Discourse on Method”, I see, and am seen, therefore I am.  

76 “…as I observed that this truth, I think, therefore I am (Cogito Ergo Sum) was so certain and of such evidence that no ground for doubt…could be alleged by the skeptics capable of shaking it, I concluded that I might…accept it as the first principle of the philosophy of which I search” Descartes, 1637, IV.
2. The cognitive component: our learnt perceptions.

*He had chosen,*  
*From all the faces he had ever seen*  
*Only his own...*  
Echo and Narcissus. (Hughes, 1997, 79)

Cultural critics Lasch\(^{77}\) and Mollon’s\(^{78}\) parallel of contemporary society with the Greek legend of Narcissus predicates my patterning of ageism within society. Culture rejects anything outside its present moment, just as Narcissus rejects the love of Echo.\(^{79}\) Life without height or depth becomes mirror flat, and culture, transfixed by its own beauty has fallen in love with its own reflection.\(^{80}\) Thus, with culture so absorbed with the visual and thus the aesthetic, the second stage of the tripartite model of ageism - the cognitive component - with its labelling and stereotyping; its concern for the external form; for what is attractive and what is not, is set seamlessly in place.

**Stereotyping**

Stereotyping is the route by which we negotiate our way through speed up society, “…a short-cut for perceptual processing.” (Braithwaite, 2002, 337) Instead of getting to know another person as an individual, with all that person’s depth, “…we rely on a heuristic that tells us that people who belong to a certain group are more likely to have interests, needs, and capacities of a particular kind.” (ibid) We only have time for the instantly beautiful, for love at first sight. Stereotyping is a shortcut protecting us from confusion, in our increasingly complex, world that constantly bombards us with

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\(^{79}\) ‘Narcissus turned and ran.

‘No’ he cried ‘no’ I would sooner be dead

Than let you touch me” (Hughes, 1997, 77)

\(^{80}\) Appendix B3.
images. Yet, in my opinion, it is a process that stops us from really engaging. It gives a sense of aesthetic order, but is actually rough compartmentalisation. Because of the self-centred nature of our society, stereotyping helps us to define ourselves as part of a distinctive ‘in-group’, protecting our self-esteem and giving us a sense of belonging. This is important in a narcissistic society where sense of self is vulnerable and fragile and “…needs to be loved and sees others only in relationship to [itself…it needs] a great deal of admiration from others, whom, conversely [it] mistrust[s] and deprecate[s].” (Goodliffe, 2005, 27) Stereotyping can also be used to explain relationships between groups and as a tool for bestowing status. It

…can be used to make out-groups the scapegoats for society’s problems…Members of society can be assured that the problem lies outside not within, the dominant group, and arguments for the need for social change can be discredited. In those ways the security provided by society’s institutions can be affirmed and maintained. (*ibid*)

Thus, in an image-conscious, death-fearing sibling culture, which quantifies status as beauty, older people are seen, not as individuals but a homogenous group, a “burden”, “rising tide” or “swelling mass” (McKie, 2005, 9) threatening disaster for a narcissistic society that needs light and undisturbed waters in which to self-reflect. The threat is perceived as a cognate shadow that hides the real detail, the real people. Older people become an out-group.

**Examples of stereotyping.**

*And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you
I will show you fear in a handful of dust*

The Waste Land -1922 (Eliot, 1963, 64)
“The Old Guard” (Price, 2005, 26) tells the stories of the nine surviving veterans of the First World War, with great detail and respect, yet the centenarians have all been photographed in deep shadow. Perhaps the photographer wanted to project the darkness of war and suffering onto their faces, but the detail of the stories their own faces tell is lost, and unless we take the trouble to read the article we simply cannot see them as individuals. To the scanning eye, a tool of speed-up society, they become invisible even though they are the subjects. We see first only the death we fear.

At the risk of reading more into the shadows than there actually is, in my opinion, this is a subtle visual example of stereotyping - age as dark and frightening, and, of the homogenous effect, where older people are perceived, as a result of stereotyping, to be all alike. Braithwaite regards stereotyping as “…imperfect knowledge that renders the individual invisible.” (Braithwaite, 2002, 317) This effect is so seamless that it is often subliminal and unseen, which is ironic as in “The Old Guard” it is manifested in an image. It is also ironic that in such a self-conscious age, the process of stereotyping and the resulting ageist out-grouping, is often unconscious. As Echo, along with all other life, fades away, Narcissus sees only himself.

Age Concern found in its survey that “…most people do not consider themselves as ageist” (Age Concern, 2005, 9) yet in a meta-analysis of research into age-discrimination it was found that we have been eager learners of stereotypical beliefs of older people since childhood. Recently when soap manufacturer “Dove” ran a radical advertising campaign using older women models, and a local chemist set one of its posters very low on an end-cap, a toddler was to be heard crying, “urghh mummy, what is wrong with that lady?” Kite and Johnson found that, by the age of three,

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81 Appendix B4.
children associate older people with decreases in physical attractiveness, activity and power. However,

More positive stereotypes of older adults emerge when children are asked to evaluate certain social qualities—although children often perceive older adults as sadder, lonelier and duller than young individuals—they also categorise them as unaggressive, polite, kind, good, friendly, wise (Kite & Johnson in Montepare & Zebrowitz, 2002, 83)

One would argue that the potential for building upon positive stereotypes of older people is intrinsic in our culturisation, yet, apart from a few exceptions, such as the Dove campaign, the cultural compass we follow points towards the negative. Even with this particular advert, the toddler’s mother would have needed to take time to explain away his fear, while facing up to her own, then search for positive models of older people he would know - “grandma’s beautiful isn’t she?” - surely a tall order in our stressful, speed up society. Ageist stereotypes are a sticky heuristic, once set they are hard to unlearn, especially within a capitalist society whose media and marketing strategies are shaped to reinforce them.
3. The Behavioural Component: what we do.

In “Acting Your Age” Galub refers to the danger of mindlessly encoding negative stereotypical beliefs about ageing which “…can lead to treatment of the elderly[sic] in ways that perpetuate these stereotypes and to the creation of social environments that accentuate their prevalence.” (Galub et al., 2002, 292) Cuddy and Fiske see such environments as commonplace.

From workplaces to medical settings, stereotyping of elderly [sic] people manifests itself through discriminatory communication and treatment…Believing older people are incompetent leads others to treat them as if they are incompetent …people are less willing to engage in challenging conversation with elderly[sic] people by asking them difficult questions. (Cuddy & Fiske, 2002, 18)

Patronising behaviour towards, and discrimination against older people in the workplace has led to an increasing amount of lawsuits in the United States, and with new legislation in place, Britain is set to follow.82 One would hope that such legislation would herald the beginning of a reclaiming of fundamental rights for older people in other important areas, such as medical health.

On average, older people wait at least 90 minutes longer to see a doctor than those under 65. Age discrimination can have terrifying consequences: upper age limits for treatments like heart bypass, kidney dialysis and breast cancer screening leave older people at great risk at a time when they need medical care the most. (Help the Aged, 2005,10)

Currently “…the negative and derogatory images of older people implicit in ageism have the effect of lowering expectations of both rights and duties.” (Thompson, 2005, 28) The new Social Care Institute for Excellence personalisation initiative shows an

82 “Since 1st October 2006, it has been unlawful for employers and others to discriminate against a person on the basis of his/her age…the UK rules are implemented by The Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006” (www.laterlife.com)
attitude shift towards encouraging independence for older and vulnerable people, however I would agree with Thompson that any challenge to ageism “…needs to be based on an understanding of age discrimination and its consequences, rather than on knee-jerk reactions to legal and policy directives.” (ibid, 85) Both Thompson and Gullette argue that ageism is a social evil so embedded in the cultural psyche that it becomes ideology, which cannot be legislated against, only demythologised and unmasked. Beginning to understand one’s own innate fear of death and decay is part of this process, as is tracing cultural changes, becoming aware of the process of negative stereotyping and its discriminatory effects. In her description of the stigmatisation of older people, Braithwaite unmasks a further result of negative stereotyping so widespread it continually stares us in the face.

The core issue in stigmatising is that an individual has an attribute that is visible, in most cases uncontroversially so, and the perceiver finds the attribute so unacceptable that he or she wants the bearer out of sight. (Braithwaite, 2002, 318)

This expression of ageism points to the challenging paradox at the heart of society’s changing demographic. Older people are about to outnumber the young at the very time that culture’s narcissistic obsession with image is at its height, or rather, to borrow Bly’s and Hughes’ imagery, at it widest, shallowest spread.

83 “Personalisation …means starting with the person as an individual with strengths, preferences and aspirations and putting them at the centre of the process of identifying their needs and making choices about how and when they are supported to live their lives.” Carr, 2010, 3)
Stigmatisation: the Beauty industry as the “New Guard”

An analysis of the way the multi-billion pound beauty industry stigmatises age for both men and women is an appropriate way of facing up to and unmasking ageism. It is a powerful example of how market forces use mass media as its language to propagate “…through its use of images, society’s belief in itself.” (Berger, 1972, 139) These are cultural beliefs based on what we own and consume, how we succeed and how we are accepted. In terms of ageism it completes the institutional creep. The industry’s advertising, common to all forms of publicity “…proposes to each of us that we transform ourselves, our lives by possessing, experiencing, buying, something more.” (ibid, 130) This proposition is displayed by an image of the already transformed ideal; always just out of reach, thus creating more desire, an endless hunger, and a negation that ultimately satisfies only the industry that created it. There is a continual reality gap between what we own and would like to own, what we achieve and what we would like to achieve, and how we are accepted and how much more we would like to be.

Ideal beauty is ideal because it does not exist. The action lies in the gap between desire and gratification…that space, in a consumer culture, is a lucrative one. (Wolfe, 1990, 176)

There is always dissatisfaction with the way we are, and, in the culturally relevant beauty industry, the way we appear to others, and the way we expect others to appear to us. Resonant with Narcissus, such unfulfilled desire transfixes, stagnates and eventually turns to loss. Narcissus

…has the terrible fate of reaching for his own self only to find it is unreachable and that he can never be integrated. The result of this self-absorption and self-loss is death. (Goodliffe, 2005, 91)

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84 - or propaganda, when oppressive ideologies are used to manipulate self-belief for the benefit of a structure of power.
Loss has no market value. Indeed, a society that realises its desires can never be fulfilled might give up trying, or begin to ask questions and thus threaten the status quo long enjoyed by the commercial world. So, in the last decade, there has been a metamorphosis in the way the reality gap is manipulated by mass media. As well as presenting images of the ideal we constantly reach for - youth, symmetry, status - the beauty industry has begun to market fear as well as dissatisfaction, by suggesting what will happen if we stop desiring. It has introduced an enemy for its most powerful and thus best loved image - the face.

Love resides in the face - in its beauty, in the music of the voice, in the warmth of the eye. Love is proved by the face, and so is unloveability proved by seeing and hearing, by being seen and being heard. (Warmser in *ibid*, 93)

We are now faced with advertising that not only fuels the desire for youth but also openly stigmatises age. When, in an advert, we see a conventionally beautiful face hidden behind the internal workings of a clock, suggesting the ravages of time, we are shown age to be the unacceptable, visible mark. Desire to see and be seen has been subtly and ironically intertwined with a desire to hide and to make invisible, for something fearful is rising up from the reality gap.

There is little doubt that cosmetic companies and cosmetic surgeons trade on stigmatising practices; wrinkles and sags are visible, they are unacceptable in a world that hankers after status and they are consequently removed from view by cosmetic companies and cosmetic surgeons for a handsome fee. High status for women demands success in battling wrinkles and sagging skin …In spite of our assault on ageism and the support in debunking beauty truisms, wrinkles and sags remain almost universally targets to erase not embrace. (Braithwaite, 2002, 318)

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86 Appendix B5
From the microcosm - the first fine line, to the macrocosm - the sagging demographic of an ageing world, wrinkles become the mark of Cain in a sibling society. They are the physical representation of three inter-related stigmas associated with ageing; loss - the underside of consumerism, failure - the underside of success, and shame - the underside of status. Today’s market forces feed on all these to stay alive. Ironically, for such a contemporary culture, this sort of stigmatisation is rooted in tradition.

a. Loss.

The media creates its advertising narratives on the understanding of a linear trajectory of decline. Daphne Merkin, describing herself as “…a hostage to an age-phobic culture” remarks

What it comes down to is this; you’re born; you get about three decades to prance around looking fresh as a daisy before the inexorable forces of gravity, the sun, free radical and pesky emotions like sadness and happiness put the shiv in; and eventually, after looking haggard for the next umpteen years, you die. (Merkin, 2005, 48)

Merkin reiterates a centuries old idea of the seven ages of humanity in her echo of Jacques in Shakespeare’s “As You Like it.”

Last scene of all...
Is second childishness, and mere oblivion;
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.
(Shakespeare, 1951, 266)

A recent beer advertisement enacted a baby being shot out of its mother’s womb like a ball from a cannon, aging in mid-air and crashing into his coffin, the lid shutting within the space of a few seconds. This reductionist version of the seven ages, brutalised and

87 “Those elements which make each woman[sic] unique - the unrepeatable irregularity of her face, the scars of a childhood trauma, the lines and furrows of a life of thought and laughter and grief and rage - exclude her from the ranks of mythical beauties…” (Wolfe, 1990, 173)
88 “…when she ages she is asked to believe that ‘without beauty’ she slides into nothingness and disintegration.” (Wolfe, 1990, 230)
robbed of its original poetry, embraces contemporary speed up and epitomises a "decline ideology" (Gullette, 2004, 9). Such narratives are “…fatally flat; prospective and phony, solipsistic, body-obsessed, pseudo-universal, context-denying, cognitively inhibiting and anxiety producing.” (ibid) The mark of the wrinkle upon the smooth face of culture turns desire into fear of loss, loss of status, loss of faculties, loss of health, loss of life, which is to be rejected at the moment of perception, in order to desire freely again. Like a Pharaoh with management skills, the marketing industries add another mountain of straw for the brick-making consumers. The fear-factor keeps us too busy to realise the true extent of our slavery.

b. Failure

Thus the stigma of loss is closely associated with the stigma of failure. Again, the media manipulates a traditional idea, the work ethic, which can be traced back to western theological interpretations of Pauline teachings of the fall from perfection and striving to regain it, and further back to Hebraic concepts of reward and punishment.89 “The stigma of poor performance remains at the heart of our capitalist economies and our social structures…” (Braithwaite, 2004, 322) This phenomenon’s modern secular version is revealed through

…its pressures of work as we compete in a global market. In such a market, only the best survive, so perfectionism becomes endemic. (Goodliffe, 2005, 47)

Age-anxiety is beginning earlier. In their examination grades and social life, young people are well schooled in the art of gaining approval and already pressurised into looking ‘perfect’. Models employed to sell anti-aging products are becoming

[89 “In the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, those who represented God must represent perfection and wholeness. (Leviticus 17-26, Hebrews 9:14) Theological interpretations of the meaning of perfection have historically included physical flawlessness as well as absolute freedom.” (Eisland, 1994, 72)
younger. On top of their existing striving for achievement along the perfection scale, the consumer industry places upon young people the added burden of the desire to turn back time. Twenty-something no longer seems so young and age-anxiety with its negative effects on interpersonal relationships is beginning earlier and earlier. L’Oreal’s oft-repeated phrase, “because you’re worth it” takes on an increasingly desperate and aggressive note.\textsuperscript{90} “In an achievement and success orientated society the norms and scripts for dealing with failure and loss with appropriate amounts of respect, concern and acceptance are strikingly absent…” (Braithwaite, 2004, 322) Thus older people with their ‘failing’ eyesight and health are aligned with lack of competence and loss of ability to achieve. They disappear for want of value. Forever falling short, the possibility of successful ageing will remain an irrelevant contradiction-in-terms. There is little to do with such a terrible blot on the face of desire apart from wipe it away, cover it, cut it out, turn from it, banish all those who carry it.

c. Shame

As an ageing society tries to cover its face, older people become marked by the stigma of shame.

Shame is felt by those groups within society that are marginalised and largely excluded from positions of control and power…such marginalisation is a form of racism, and racism produces shame in its victims…shamed people are withdrawn, want to hide, and do not often ‘rock the boat’ or pose a threat. (Goodliffe, 2005, 38)

\textsuperscript{90} In a culture where anxiety levels are catalysts for change, the beauty industry pays lip service to the post-feminist perception that women are now more empowered, thus there has been a move from the emphasis on women needing to be attractive towards men, to needing to feel empowered as part of the in-group, ie young people. The fact that this plays on women’s fears and is even now primarily aimed at women by an industry still dominated by men, is one of our unnoticed and unchallenged cultural under-stories.
Thus a prophecy is self-fulfilled. Believing ourselves to be inept, we become so. We laugh at ourselves and apologise for our senior moments. Believing ourselves to have no voice, we stop speaking. Believing ourselves to be absent-minded we become absent, in the same way as the poor of Gutierrez’ Latin America become absent, “…of little or no significance, as well as being without opportunity to manifest [our] sufferings, solidarities, projects and hopes.” (Gutierrez, 1993, 135.) Believing ourselves to be fading to grey, we disappear ourselves.

To the extent that we are social beings, our self-worth depends on the worth ascribed to us by others… stigmatising actions that separate us from others destroy the essence of our social being and induce a passivity that robs us of ourselves. (Braithwaite, 2004, 319)

Either that or we undermine our integrity by donning the mask, by reaching for the anti-aging cream, the needle or the knife, and take our place alongside Narcissus by the pool.
Conclusion

It is universally agreed that ageing *is* a challenge, but the power structure of mass media, for its own commercial purposes, has institutionalised age as a threat. This, in its turn, needs to be challenged.

It has been argued that the mass media influence people’s identities, shape, self-identification and body perception, and affect ways in which self and others look at each other. The media are both alluring and consequential to millions of people because “we respond to the representation of an older person as much as, if not more than, we respond to old people.”… In short, the mass media provide a powerful site to define or redefine the meaning of ageing. (Wilkinson & Ferraro, 2004, 343)

Meanwhile we accept uncritically the mixed messages of mass media. We seize the day but miss the moment. We do not question why television “…supports and perpetuates ageism” (*ibid*, 343) or why there are relatively few rounded older characters in television plays, or adverts, only caricatures or figures of fun, even though “…television is considered a leading pastime of middle-aged and older adults [while] less than 3% of adult characters on prime time television have been judged to be over the age of sixty five.” (*ibid*) We do not notice that the contemporary apotheosis of young, new and exciting is actually based on ancient mores, status quo and the anxious norm. Nor do we notice or celebrate when the norm is challenged. For example, the sympathetic portrayal of older parents in BBC’s modern adaptation of A Midsummer night’s dream, powerful enough to be more than simply a foil to the younger protagonists and to give a sense of strengthening cultural undercurrents flowing out from the shallows towards the depths. As does Guardian writer Stephen

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92 November 28 2005, BBC1.
93 Another exception is “The Young Ones” a BBC 1 program presenting a celebrity re-creation of an American psychological experiment where older people were placed in an environment which
Moss’s positive reworking of Jacques’ last scene of all after meeting with seven centenarians.

At 100, it seems, you want for nothing, crave nothing, regret nothing. Do you have any regrets?” I kept asking. None, they insisted, or none they could remember. The tide of life had swept the beach clean. The survivor’s story was, at heart, a happy one. “I’ve had my ups and downs but its been a happy life” they kept telling me. Sometimes it seemed anything but, yet they exhibited a stoic calm, an unshakeable acceptance at the hand that life had dealt them. (Moss, 2006, 7)

These examples also nurture hope that the ageist heart of mass media could be the very place where ageism is challenged. If this century’s ageing demographic is a *kairos* moment where a universal change in attitudes towards age and death could be possible, the mass media is potentially a *kairos* place. Thus unmasking of the media’s institutionalised ageism should continue and the small blossoming of age-positive stereotyping should be recognised and celebrated. However,

Stigmatising is a problem that requires co-ordinated action at both the individual and the societal levels. Considerable progress has yet to be made in uncoupling loss from the negative emotions of repulsion and shame. (Braithwaite, 2004, 322)

We are all culpable. The *kairos* moment and place has to happen within us. If we can begin to understand what constitutes ageism and to realise that it is culture rather than chronology that ages individuals; that many of our beliefs about ourselves are overwritten and changeable cultural scripts or symbols; we can start to question the status quo. Why are we so driven by an aesthetic of perfection and what aspects of our Christian tradition add to or challenge our feelings of anxiety and shame?

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encouraged them to act out their thirty years younger selves. Sam Wollaston in his review states “Old people: they’re brilliant, more of them on TV please” and one viewer commented “gosh, aren’t old people interesting? And certainly a lot more fun and life-enhancing to watch than the adolescents that populate the rest of television” (Wollaston, 2010, 1,4)
The bodies of grown ups
Come with stretch marks and scars
Faces that have been lived in
Relaxed breasts and bellies
Backs that give trouble
And well-worn feet...
And yet I think there is a flood of beauty
Beyond the smoothness of youth
(Morley, 1992, 116)\textsuperscript{94}

\textsuperscript{94} Appendix B6.
The Body distorted: Is the church ageist?

In 2006 “Churches Together” in Loughborough held a conference, “Valuing Age - a workshop to explore the Church’s Vision for Older People.” with speakers from the Leveson Centre for the study of Ageing, Spirituality and Social Policy. One of the afternoon workshops, “Is the church ageist?” was run by a full-time, ordained Anglican age-specialist. At first sight, this and other conferences run by Outlook, Pilgrim Homes and the Church Army, seem to exemplify the church as a whole responding to the demographic changes that herald an increasingly older population.

Corporately, some churches have begun to take on board older peoples’ unique status and to address their own ageism. There is a movement away from stereotyping older people as persons with problems to be solved, towards a more rounded view that includes seeing older people as having gifts to offer as well as needs to be met. (Eldred, 2003, 73)

Eldred, after conversations with older women, regards the Methodist and Anglican denominations as most proactive in this area. As a Baptist minister with special responsibility for older people, I represent, structurally, my church’s growing awareness of the very group of people culture renders invisible. Over the last two decades there has been a growth in positive Baptist corporate attitudes towards older people and recognition of a burgeoning necessity for churches to redress the historical and cultural bias towards younger people. In 2007 The Baptist Home Mission Department’s “Fresh Horizons” tour, a “third age” resource for local churches, exemplified how older people are being theologically reflected upon, and embraced

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96 “I think we are aware that, with much emphasis usually given to youth this is a neglected area that deserves greater and more thoughtful attention” Graham Sparkes, letter to Knox from the Mission Advisor to the Baptist Union, 21 October, 1998 (Knox, 2002, 122)
missiologically. Protection of older and vulnerable people has also found a place alongside child protection on the Baptist agenda.\textsuperscript{97}

In the Baptist Times older people are receiving a more popular press. For example, Vi McCardle, a member of Exmouth Baptist church, was celebrated for her inspiration, her faithfulness, dedication and spiritual awareness, having “…seen changes in people’s faith and has always encouraged people in that.” (Thomas, 2005, 5). Also, having age on the agenda of a community forum organised by Chipping Sodbury Baptist Church enabled them “…to understand what the gaps were in the provision of care for older people.” (Hobson, 2010a, 5) However, more visible and frequent have been headlines stating “…Church attendance will drop to just 2% by 2040.” (Grote, \textit{ibid}, 1) In language and tone, echoing McKie’s quasi-prophetic Observer article, Britain’s churches are “on the road to doom” (\textit{ibid}) and, according to Christian Research’s statistical analysis, there will be a “…predicted drop by two thirds over the next 35 years.”\textit{(ibid)}\textsuperscript{98} These figures are set alongside the fact that “…The average age of Christian congregations, meanwhile, will rise to 64.”\textit{(ibid)} The prospect of ageing congregations is nothing to be celebrated here. Grote is suggesting that the demographic shift is contributing to the “…real crisis [and that the] “story behind [the statistics] is how few young people are being attracted to churches.” \textit{(ibid)} In the light of an attitude which views older people simply as part of the church’s feared demise, part of the problem rather than the solution, any celebration of the unique gifts of long life is rendered patronising and any news about churches reaching out to older people,  

\textsuperscript{97} Safe to Belong. Baptist Union of Great Britain BU322, 2009.

\textsuperscript{98} At the time of writing Christian Research has released statistics that show “…these trends have not continued and the church is no longer in decline.” (Hewitt, 2010,1) possibly revealing that “…the heavy declines are a thing of the past and the doomsday predictions of a few years ago, that are still regularly cited by journalists, now seem wide of the mark.” (Sharp in Hobson, 2010b, 1) It will be interesting to see if this heralds a new confidence, and, if so, whether the correlate with older people and the church’s demise will remain.
proscribed. Even though “…older people are a substantial and growing proportion of the church going population” (Eldred, 2003, 14), and not merely from present members growing older, the simple equation of lessening numbers equalling dwindling churches half-full of older people does not take into account, or as a challenge, the hidden numbers of older people who are also at present leaving churches, again not merely because of infirmity.

Figures suggest that the need for fellowship and belonging on the part of the majority of older people is not being met by churches and so many have ceased to belong. (Hammond & Treetops in Jewell, 2001, 38)

Albert Jewell, pastoral director of Methodist Homes for the Aged,99 reflecting on the modest level of ecclesiastical response to the needs and gifts of older people, wisely understates that, although

…there is now a quite exciting groundswell across the churches of enthusiasts for the cause. Permeating church strategies, mission statements and activity may, however, take a little longer. (Jewell, 2001, 8)100

My own sense of isolation, being one of few age-specialists in my denomination, and possibly any denomination101, the relative lack of resources for older people, and my experience of ageism on a daily basis is a powerful counterbalance to any growth in awareness of the value of older people. I agree with Eldred that “…many churches …have much work to do to overcome their ageism and their lack of awareness regarding the needs and resources older women [and men] bring to the church

99 Although I am careful to use inclusive language and prefer the term older people, to the more homogenous, ‘the Aged’ I hope to respect throughout the terms used by others who love older people but who may not have the same priority of language.
100 “…despite the growing number of elderly people in our society and their disproportionate concentration in the Urban Priority or inner areas of cities…the blessings and burdens of their situation received only modest attention in these Church reports.” (Bradford and Leeds Metropolitan Districts, 1992/3, 7)
101 Apart from the facilitator I was the only age-specialist at the Valuing Age conference, and, at a similar conference held by Outlook in 2004, my position was greeted with wonder and the question “where are the rest of you?”
community.” (Eldred, 2003, 83) I also agree that any challenge to ageism “…needs to be based on an understanding of age discrimination and its consequences, rather than on knee-jerk reactions” (Thompson, 2005, 28), in this context, to the fear of our own demise. Knox’s comments on prevailing attitudes to ageing embraces both sacred and secular

…ultimately the bad which outweighs the good aspects of growing older, is that death is waiting. Despite the glories of Autumn, Winter will arrive. (Knox, 2002, 54)

There can be no celebration of the positive attitudes towards older people, without the unmasking of continually prevalent learnt negatives; no real move forwards into a new era which respects old as well as young without the facing up to our own fear of ageing and death. I believe that the Christian faith, as expressed through the Body of Christ, has told and untold depths to offer in the overcoming of these fears, yet a cultural concentration upon youth is binding it in shallower waters. My critique of attitudes of the church as a whole towards older people is in order to comment on an ecclesiastical ageism that I feel has paralleled, intertwined and influenced the prevalence of ageism in our culture. Using the same tripartite model of understanding as in Age Shallow, I will undertake

1. a study of the church’s theological self understanding in regards to age which will equivocate the affective component influencing ageism;
2. a patterning of the resulting stereotyping of older people, the cognitive component;
3. the behavioural component, the ways older people are treated on the basis of our feelings and learnt beliefs.
I intend to show how the church as the Body of Christ has leaned towards younger people and its own youth, and away from ageing and its own death, to the detriment of its older members, and to the point of its own distortion.
1. The affective component: what we are

For it was you who created my inmost being;
You knit me together in my mother’s womb
I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made
Psalm 119: 13-14

Paul may have worked early Christian beliefs into the metaphorical shape of the Body of Christ, but the body itself was formed deep in the womb of the Old Testament. The interconnection of the many members, the respect and honouring of weaker members, the indispensability of all, which became Paul’s new aesthetic, had been intricately woven from strands of Hebraic thought. While bearing in mind that “…the socio-economic backgrounds of Biblical times are very different from those pertaining today” (Jewell, 1988, B1) we can go back beyond to find more positive attitudes to ageing. Indeed, we find attitudes, which, in their counter-cultural caring and honouring of older people, transcend and challenge our own.

1. Biblical thoughts on age immediately reveal that I have fallen into the ageist trap of homogeneously imaging all older people as the weakest members of the body, while

The days of our life are seventy years,
Or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
Even then their span is only toil and trouble;
They are soon gone and we fly away.
(Psalm 90:10)

I am so transfixed by our life span’s toil and trouble, and then its ending, that I do not recognise the sheer strength that it takes to live to eighty years, or acknowledge the natural place of an older person’s perspective in the body of the Psalms. ¹⁰²

¹⁰² Psalm 71: 5-6 & 17-18.
2. The stories of the Patriarchs, as “…exemplars of living long lives in obedience to and in close communion with God” show old age as a time of “…growth and productivity.” (Jewell, 1998, B1) Abraham’s story begins at the age of seventy-five, Sarah is a mother at ninety, Jacob is an old man when he witnesses the reconciliation of his family, and Moses is eighty when he enters the wilderness, and dies full of vigour at one hundred and twenty.103

3. The Ten Commandments, as the basis of living both in exile and in community, include, through the honouring of parents, the expectation of respect of young for old. Jewell (Jewell 1998b) points out that the parent/child relationship mirrors that of God and his people. If older people are not honoured, then God is not honoured.

4. “The community as a whole is held to owe a special duty of care to its vulnerable members, such as widows who may have no immediate family support…” (ibid, B3)104 and any mistreatment of elders is regarded as oppression.105

5. Throughout the Old Testament “…there is much celebrating the blessings of old age, continuing good health, reasonable material prosperity, a large and supportive family, a wisdom appreciated by the whole community and a peaceful death” (ibid)106 all without losing the realities of the challenges ageing brings.107

Psalm 92 celebrates the flourishing of the righteous and the fruitfulness of old age through the metaphor of the palm tree, also symbolic of a beautiful woman. The

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103 Deuteronomy 34:7.
104 Deuteronomy 26: 12-13, the book of Ruth.
105 Isaiah 3:5.
107 Ecclesiastes 3:1-12.
holistic poetry of Hebrew scripture has no aesthetic problem with regarding older people as beautiful, with no division between outer/body and inner/spiritual beauty. Indeed, I would suggest that, from an Old Testament perspective, and my own growing perspective, there is a special and glorious becoming in old age. The Hebrew word for grey is *seybah*, the crowning glory of life lived, “…there is a sense of admiration in the use of this word, a respect for old age” (Brown, 2000, 6) and a sense of awe in the face of its beauty.

Much of the Old Testament’s perspective on ageing is carried into the New Testament, resonant with the transformative character of the new messianic age. At the fulcrum of its dawning are the older people, Simeon and Anna, Zechariah and Elizabeth. They are traditionally viewed either as antecedents or precursors, symbols of the end of the old order of Judaism; where temple priests are struck dumb and the offspring of the old and barren is not fit to tie up the sandals of the child of the young virgin; where the one near death lifts high the new birth to celebrate then die in peace, and have no further significance. The old has gone the new has come. However, the West Yorkshire Faith in elderly project “Called to be Old” combines a more holistic Hebrew understanding with an enlightened modern view of the value of age. Simeon is “…an old man whose wisdom embraces hindsight, insight and foresight, and it is urged that older people in general have the calling to keep the past alive, live for the present moment, and be concerned for the future of society” (Hector, 1998, B4) Zechariah finds his voice once more in a hymn where past, present and future dance together.  

108 As these ancients are the ones who people the story of Jesus’ birth, young

108 Luke 1:67-79 “…this act of praise celebrates God’s deliverance of God’s people, in faithfulness to the covenant and in fulfillment of the promises in the past…but it also has a goal, “that we might worship him.”” (Lieu, 1997, 12)
and old dovetail in a pattern of blessing which threads through the rest of the Scriptures.

1. Jesus begins his reconciling ministry inter-generationally by healing Simon’s mother-in-law.\(^{109}\)

2. The healings of the haemorrhaging woman and Jairus’ daughter are inextricably linked.\(^{110}\)

3. Jesus’ teaching about new birth happens in dialogue with old Nicodemus.\(^{111}\)

4. Jesus condemns the practice of Corban when used by children to avoid respecting their older parents.\(^{112}\)

5. On the cross, Jesus brings together his mother and his young friend into a new form of family.\(^{113}\)

6. Peter uses Joel’s comparatively cross-generational vision to celebrate Pentecost’s new freedom.\(^{114}\)

7. In the dawning of the early church, in an echo of Jesus’ ministry, Peter’s first healing is the crippled older man at the city gate called Beautiful.\(^{115}\)

8. With the apostolic assimilation of the Resurrection transcending both youth and age

…the heart of Pauline theology…enables a totally different view of human death that was possible within the Old Testament perspective. The new dimension of ‘being in Christ’ or Christ within [being] qualitatively different in this life and finding its consummation beyond death. (\textit{ibid}, B5)

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\(^{110}\) Luke 8: 40-56.

\(^{111}\) John 3: 1-22.


\(^{113}\) John 19:26-27 “Jesus as Word had, at the very outset come \textit{eis ta idia} and \textit{hoi idioi} had not received him (1:1) Now a spiritual son reverses that tragic history and receives a mother from “the Son”, to begin a community of believers in that only Son who speaks with power from the cross.” (Sloyan, 1988, 211)

\(^{114}\) Acts 2:17-21.

\(^{115}\) Acts 3:2-10.
9. In early Christianity, deaconesses “…drawn from the official list of widows, which had clear age stipulations regarding membership” (Merchant, 2003, 118) were part of the practical outworking of the church, with regards to cross-generational social outreach, and by the fourth century were “…actively playing a central role in the church’s mission.” (ibid)

10. In Ephesians, although Paul speaks to hierarchical Roman householders, with different family patterns from the Old Testament; the call to “Honour your father and mother…so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth…”116 unites the blessings of young and old “in the Lord”, “…there is nothing about growing older that can or should separate any member from the Christian community.” (Eldred, 2003, 15)

11. Paul’s metaphor of the Body of Christ, where all are equal and interconnected, is both inspired by, and undercuts, the Roman body politic and aesthetic he speaks into. Of I Corinthians 12 Jewell writes

Although the apostle does not specifically mention older people, their inclusion is surely axiomatic since they were likely to be amongst those marginalised by others because they could be viewed as being weaker, less comely, less useful. (Jewell, 1998, B5)

Yet if Paul is forming his metaphor from an essentially Hebraic viewpoint, where older people are symbols of strength and flourishing, to be honoured for their full and beautiful lives and special place in God’s heart, and yet speaking into an ideology with classical hierarchical perspectives on strength, beauty and power more similar to our own culture, then ironies abound. Who actually are the weak or the less comely?

116 Ephesians 6:2-3.
Ultimately “…the bible typically presents long life as a blessing from God, especially as it is associated with personal development and growth through successive stages of maturity.” (Hilborn & Bird, 2002, 25) If we weave this biblical model into our modern hermeneutic, we can ask - how is God blessing us through this change in the demographic? Do we receive the ageing of society and of churches as a blessing, or a curse?

In her researching of ways older people feel valued within the Baptist denomination, Brown argues that the scriptural reverence for old age is at odds with contemporary society, and contemporary Christianity.

Equality and justice for all age groups is a major Biblical principle which is in danger of being lost in society today, and perhaps more seriously in churches. However diverse the cultural differences, God is a God for the young and the old. His desire is that all humans are treated equally and fairly and that both young and old are valued as humans made in his own image. (Brown, 2000, 9)

Pope John Paul II, in his “Letter to the elderly” felt that part of the problem is the obscuring of the positives of Jewish heritage within Christianity and a “…mentality which gives priority to immediate human usefulness and productivity [leading] to contempt for the later years of life, while older people themselves are led to wonder whether their lives are still worthwhile.” (Pope Jean Paul II, 1999: 9) Western Christianity has mined the same seam of Judaism but formed a Body of Christ both statuesque and hardened in attitude towards older people. Deep in the bedrock of traditional thought, along with the poetic and holistic celebration of age, is the doctrine of humanity.

Here we learn that God created humankind (whatever race, sex or age) in ‘his’ own image (Genesis 1:27) and his original intention, vitiated by ‘the Fall’ would seem to be that they should be immortal like him. Indeed the great life-spans attributed to
the likes of Methusalah may be regarded as ‘the afterglow’ of his paradisal age, part of the running down process, as it were, following upon Adam’s disobedience.” (Jewell, 1998, B1)

In this interpretation of creation, death and decay are bound up with disobedience and punishment. According to Saint Augustine,

In Paradise, then, man[sic]…lived in the enjoyment of God and was good by God’s goodness; he lived without any want, and had it in his power so to live eternally. He had food that he might not hunger, drink that he might not thirst, the tree of life that old age might not waste him. There was in his body no corruption, nor seed of corruption, which could produce in him any unpleasant sensation. He feared no inward disease, no outward accident. Soundest health blessed his body, absolute tranquillity his soul. (Augustine, City of God, Book XIV, Ch 26)

Augustine’s idealisation of “Adam’s pre-fallen state” has a long history in Jewish rabbinical literature where “…the first man was endowed with extraordinary stature…with physical beauty, with surpassing wisdom, with a brilliancy which eclipsed that of the sun.” (Hick, 1985, 65) Thus, like Rembrandt’s etching “Adam and Eve”, post-apple humanity becomes simply human, losing lustre and beauty, the ravages of time etches deep, they become senescent and finally die.¹¹⁸ A thought-system based upon the doctrine of humanity could possibly make a direct theodical link between old age and sin, thus spawning an ingrained spiritualised ageism. How are we, as church communities, to treat older people with dignity as images of God if something very deep in us looks away, all the while gnostically yearning for a return to pre-fall paradise, or eschatologically yearning for a future heavenly time where “…there is no old age… nor any evils of old age, but all things related to decay are utterly removed, and incorruptible glory reigns in every part” (Chrysostom, 347-407b, Vol 9 1:11) Or, in the meantime, practicing rampant perfectionism in our reflection of contemporary individualist, consumer culture. With only an idealised far

¹¹⁷ Genesis 2:17, Genesis 3:3.
¹¹⁸ Appendix C1.
past and far future and a virtually unattainable present, afraid of its own demise, the church begins to compete in the marketplace.

Self-improvement is a defining feature of our age. People want to be transformed so that they become better. And that of course is the business of the church - to help individuals have life-transforming experiences of God that lead to self-improvement. Can the church meet consumers at the point of this desire? (Mynagh, 2004, 69)

As noted, old age is not marketable, and, if the modern church is finding its heart only in one strand of its heritage, one that negates age rather than honours it, then the Body of Christ becomes de-authenticated and disconnected from a large part of itself. Instead of being formed upon the Pauline model of “…mutual responsibility and dependence, shared authority and a celebration of the diversity of life…for all creation, not just certain groups of human beings to survive and thrive” (Eldred, 2003, 18) it sets itself over against, and thus becomes part of, “…the hierarchical, competitive social structures of most of the western world” (ibid)

Back at the pool: reflecting on the affective component

The rise of consumerism is one of the seismic cultural shifts, which, along with some seriously pot-bound theological roots, has led to a general reduction in the status of older people within churches. This, in my opinion, is linked to the reduction of the church’s status in culture as a whole - other shifts include

1. In the new Millenium, the heat of communication technology and consumerism is melting culture until it is …mobile, mutable, fluid, flexible’. Consumer culture, dependent as it is on the electronically mediated signs and images that restlessly circle the globe is in constant flux. More like a screensaver than a movie, it is always altering in new configurations (Lyon, 2000, 77)
As churches try to pilot themselves through fluid culture, anything that represents the order, regulation or fixity of the modern era, anything, indeed, which older people may represent, becomes awkward, cumbersome or irrelevant.

2. In response to culture’s increasing pluralism and the resulting increase in its spiritual vocabulary, Merchant argues that the church has downplayed religion, the meeting together as the Body of Christ, in favour of spirituality, and the individual’s search for meaning. In doing so older people as representative of a more communal, multi-generational society, become excluded.

The tragedy is that this is an area into which many older people could speak, sharing how religion and spirituality combine in a life lived, but their voices are not lifted up…[like the older people of the early church] they lived their lives constantly reconciling their past, present and future in a way that a younger person simply cannot. (Merchant, 2003, 128)

3. Life-style changes wrought by consumerism; new technology; changes from heavy industrial to service-related culture; the increase of women in employment; the end of modernity and a more questioning ethos can be gathered together as part of what is now a secular society. This change, as it has unfolded over the past four centuries, has led to a “…shift away from a reliance on religious institutions.” (Lynch, 2002, 28) The combination of secular and plural has led to great concern about people leaving the church, with the church then fearing its own demise. For, “…in the liquid world the failure to produce a new product line eventually leads to death.” (Ward, 2002, 72)
As stated, because of our ancient instinct for survival, we are hard-wired to fear ageing and death, but we can use our rational and transcendent thoughts, our imaginations, our faith and traditions, anything which calls upon our sense of common humanity, also innate, to put our sense of preservation into a better perspective. Sadly, it seems that western Christianity, even as it celebrates its sense of common humanity through the indwelling of the Body of Christ, is in the midst of its own existential panic attack. It has lost its power to challenge the injustices of exclusion and oppressions of cultural ageism. From Augustine to Rembrandt, from Chrysostom to new Millennium, older people remind us that we sin, and sin, according to the doctrine of humanity, is death.

Yet Heidegger writes that it is death itself that provides life with meaning, that life, bounded by death, becomes the fullness of life.

From our considerations of totality, end and that which is still outstanding, there has emerged the necessity of interpreting the phenomenon of death as Being-towards-the-end, and of doing so in terms of Dasein’s basic state…Death is a possibility-of-Being which Dasein itself has to take over in every case. With death Dasein stands before itself in its ownmost potentiality for Being. (Heidegger, 1926, II.I.50, 293)\textsuperscript{119}

Indeed, Heidegger possibly goes as far to say that death not only provides life with possibilities and meaning, but that death is life’s meaning. A theological reflection upon this would be that if Christ has conquered death, then Christ becomes life’s meaning, and yet the church seems bound in a pre-resurrection paradox. It fears to die. Across the denominations, the fear of death strikes the heart of the Body of Christ, as, along with culture, it traces with shaking fingers the trajectory of decline.

\textsuperscript{119}“Man[sic] questions his own Being and that of other things in the world. He is always - in now matter how vague a way - aware of his being in the world. Heidegger called the Being of this questioner who already has some understanding of Being in general “existence” or Dasein” (Farrell in Krell, 1978,19)
The rapidly declining rates in church attendance lead some sociologists to suggest that it is entering a phase of near terminal decline from which it is unlikely ever to recover to any significant extent. (Lynch, 2002, 3)

The fear of dying, of disappearing, of ceasing to be, is couched in a subtle ageism, packed full of euphemisms and shock adjectives, as the young are turned to in the hope of revival, instead of to the multi-generational holism of new birth.

Almost half of all churchgoers in England are over forty-five; a quarter are over sixty-five…If more young people don’t attend, churches will continue to empty simply because older people are passing away (Mynagh, 2004, 60)

When these statistics are presented, ageist culture’s lexicon of fear is mined for phrases such as “time bomb”, the church “shrivelling up” while “…struggling congregations in villages, outer estates and increasingly in the suburbs ‘smell the stench of decay.’” (ibid, 61) In the Evangelical Alliance’s report, “God and the Generations”, the tension between the existence of many mono-generational British congregations and the need for the church as a whole to be generationally diverse, is addressed, but again, fear wins the argument “…as the statistics on church attendance confirm, such mono-generationalism in the British congregational context is increasingly a mono-generationalism of the elderly - a trend which incidentally bodes ill for the future health and renewal of the Christian community.” (Hilborn, 2002, 181)

Knox reads the signs of the times accurately when he writes

Virtually everyone predicts a rise in the percentage of older people attending church. It is all said sadly, and reflects on the attitude towards older people: no more please, unless we can’t help it. The whole problem of a rise in percentages of older people is that it leads to a psychological negativism towards any work to reach more of them or even to concentrate on the needs of those who do attend. (Knox, 2002, 110)
The only alternatives are to get “on our knees” for more children to enter the church\(^{120}\) or to encourage more youth niche churches that may “…foster maturity and growth more significantly better than older models.” (ibid) However, the dependence upon young people for growth is possibly the oldest model of all. Ward’s comment that “…in the liquid world the failure to produce a new product line eventually leads to death” (Ward, 2002, 72) resonates all the way back to the Old Testament’s dependence upon the continuation of generations in order to survive and grow, the “…essentiality of man’s ‘seed’ to preserve and immortalise family lineage.” (Stevenson-Moessner, 2003, 55) The “…constant expectation of sons to be born” (ibid) from Adam and Eve to Zechariah shows the emphasis of youth as the future.\(^{121}\) In Mark’s genealogy there is “…both the genetic continuity and radical discontinuity with this male Hebrew lineage” (ibid, 57) adding women and ending with Joseph as the adoptive parent.\(^{122}\)

Thus New Testament Scripture’s first family, Mary and Joseph alter the bio-logic flow of lineage and inaugurate the Christian era. The first family represent a theological typology of the Christian household of faith…a relationship based upon the person of Christ, conceived by the Holy Spirit. For those in that lineage belief determines inclusion as a child of God. (ibid)

While assimilating this new typology and rejecting inclusion through biological lineage, Western Christianity has still hung onto the idea of generational renewal and the message communicated by present churches about the power of the young to revive and renew is the same as it was nearly a century ago. In the nineteen thirties church growth was commented on as follows.

\(^{120}\) Baptist initiative, June 11, 2006.
\(^{121}\) This resonates with and gives a narrative framework to the secular theory of ageing known as “Programmed senescence theory where “…the body has a genetically built-in program to decay after its reproductive phase is completed. The popular version is that the older members of the species die off to make room for the younger breeding members” (Kuhn in Hector, 1988, A10)
\(^{122}\) Mark 1:1-17.
In order to expand, therefore, a church must increase its stock of young potential recruits by first increasing its stock of young adult members or adherents…the number of baptisms in any given year will tend to determine the number of new members about fifteen years later. (Currie, 1977, 51)

However, from a refreshingly radical perspective, Rev Dr David Spriggs rejects as a myth that “…which has significantly affected the ways the church has operated…that young people are the best group on which the church should focus its energy…in all sorts of ways, including time and money, the contribution which an older person can make to the Christian community from sixty-five to seventy-five may well be much greater than someone from twenty-one to thirty-one.” (Spriggs, 1998, H2)

At present this opinion remains counter-cultural, with scattered small pockets of light reflecting it. For example

1. The growing awareness of ‘God speaking’ through demographic changes leading to the creation of my own post as associate minister with special responsibility for older people in Ashby Baptist Church.

2. Social action programme “Shining splendour” run by a team aged between thirteen and ninety four in the “Abundant Life Church” in Bradford. Team leader Christine Chapman says of their planned Older People’s Day

We will bring them in from all around the city, have a meal, pamper them with massage and aromatherapy, hairdos and Bible discussions. We will have Word and Worship, and its going to be purpose filled and planned so people are going to feel really useful. People should not give up on life because they are older. It’s a different season of their life and we can plan for it and grow together. (Pilgrim Homes Magazine, 2006, 32)

Across the denominations more and more churches are holding annual Holiday at Home events. In my own context, when the church sanctuary becomes a cruise...

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123 Assemblies of God.
ship, the African Savannah or the Scottish Highlands there is a time of celebration and honouring for older people and a meeting point for generations.

Yet on the whole, with regards to younger people and its need to be attractive to them, the church retains consumerism’s status quo, disappearing older people in the process. The correlation of healthy church and younger people remains a given.

When Christians move to a new town they shop around for a church…most of us will have a wish list in this situation: good preaching, warm fellowship, exciting youth ministry. (Ward, 2002, 61)

It is a given by “…the culture of the young, including those researchers who generally have not reached old age themselves, who make old age seem to be a problem.” (Knox, 2002, 49) In its adoption of a youth culture, and lack of critique by youthful commentators, the church is in the process of rendering older people “…second-class citizens rather than senior citizens.” (Beasley-Murray in ibid, 60) In a mirror image of ageist society where there is “…little thought [given] to the perpetuation of lineage” (Shriver, 2005, 41) and where heritage is taken for granted, the over-arching belief that the young are the future of the church, is in danger of rendering the Body of Christ so conscious of its own image that it forgets its past and its future, as it stares narcissus-like into culture’s shallow pool.

2. The cognitive component: the two-dimensional body

The church has entered a visual age where sunlight shines in myriad pixels on the surface of the pool and it has, without a doubt, been culturally creative in its dialogue with society. There has been a healthy reconnection with colour and image in the church as a whole, but the Body’s self-image remains theologically blurred. The energy it exudes peering through the post-modern glitter remains directed at youth, with older people remaining, at best, on the periphery of its vision and, at worst, invisible. As it concentrates upon its own survival in presenting an attractive image to younger generations, it reduces older people to monochrome stereotypes, just like secular culture, but with its own particular language.

The prevailing image of “…a large cold building half-filled with ‘little old ladies’ trying to sing ancient hymns to boring and slow tunes” (Brown, 2000, 3) is the very stereotype the church is attempting to ‘grow out of’, thus, ironically, perpetuating its own ageism. In its need to act younger, it must believe itself to be old, and being old, it must fight its own decline.

1. Tidmarsh outlines the model of ageing which feeds the stereotypical belief that to be old is to decline.

The life-cycle is seen as a flattened parabola. We become fully functioning towards the end of our second decade, continue on a fairly even course for the next thirty years or so and then begin a decline which becomes accelerated once we reach our mid sixties and ends in old age characterised by malfunctioning and general incapacity (Tidmarsh, 1998, A2)

This model which sees ageing as a “…sort of sad coda to ‘real life’” (ibid) underlies the question asked by an emerging church commentator of present robust congregations, “…as these growing congregations ‘grey’
and older members pass away, how will these ‘healthy’ denominations and streams avoid chasing the others into decline?” (Moynagh, 2004, 208) Age is a threatening shadow darkening the vision of the future.

2. Older people in churches are often segregated then homogeneously grouped; retired, luncheon clubs, ladies fellowships, Senior Alpha, third and fourth-agers and the like. There is often little celebration of their individuality, or opportunities to partake in multi-generational activities.

You’ve been an individual all your life and you continue to be so as you get older. You don’t just fall into a group all playing bingo or whatever it is. They don’t give you credit for having your own level of intelligence. They rule that out…I would like to be considered as a person; not particularly in a category as an ‘older person’. Particularly in church, we are all one in Christ Jesus and there should be that unity. (Eldred, 2003, 31)

3. Age’s correlation with fear of change, thus with stagnation, is a prevailing stereotype expressed by the church structurally and personally. Emerging church commentator Ward argues that the modern as opposed to emerging church is locked into and increasingly finding the power of its being, in the past.

The nostalgic community sells itself as the one place where communal meetings remain possible in society…the mutation of solid churches into heritage, refuge and nostalgic communities has seriously decreased its ability to engage in genuine mission in liquid modernity. These mutations degrade the gospel genetic code of the church. (Ward, 2002, 28)

The power of memory, a unique gift that sees its fulfilment through older people, is denigrated on a corporate level as self-delusory nostalgia. Ward, as he throws out the past in favour of the future, may have forgotten that the context he is speaking from is the interface of past, present and future, peopled by the likes of Zechariah, Anna and Simeon, who would celebrate, from the
freedom of their long perspectives, that change and age can be said in the same sentence.

Elderly people may not after all need so much protection from alarming innovations. That is too easy a stereotype. It’s young people who are surprisingly conformist in following the current fashions, even when they think they are being rebellious. Older people may feel able to be less timid about absorbing new ideas than the young ones who are in the thick of the struggle and have to take responsibility. Grandparents may allow themselves to be less shockable than parents dare allow themselves to be. (Oppenheimer, 2005, 2)

It is a learnt belief that older people hate change, thus they can be excluded from voicing opinions at every level, from decisions about the church to decisions about themselves. They can often be left out of meaningful and interesting activities. People are very bad at thinking, ‘Oh you wouldn’t like that’…And they’ve no idea…You only have to have grey hair and they think you’ve kind of had it as regards excitement and adventure in your thinking. They think you’ve got stuck somewhere. I’m not terribly set about things. If I say ‘No’ to something today, it might not mean I would say ‘No’ to something similar tomorrow, because tomorrow is a different day. (Eldred, 2003, 55)

On a pastoral level, if churches cannot equate older people with growth and change, their ability to empathise with and learn from their incredible life changes will be severely curtailed.

4. Limited understanding of the life challenges of long-lived people also means limited understanding of their faith journeys.

In an ageist society what older people desperately need to hear and to experience is that ageing can be a positive process, that they have so much to give and to share, that they deserve credit for having kept the faith and held onto important values, that they have proved themselves to be effective ‘friendship evangelists’ among their contemporaries, and that, by the grace of God, the best is yet to be. (Jewell, 2001, 3)

Their need “…still to be nurtured in their spiritual growth, and in their deep desire for relevant and sustaining worship” (ibid, 8) is not high on discipleship
agendas. Older people are often dismissed for having a ‘learnt’ faith, rather than a personal relationship with Christ, simply because their traditional educational experiences means that in learning situations they listen and absorb rather than express and discuss. Indeed “…the assumption can be too easily made that [they] will have reached a plateau in their spiritual development and are unlikely to progress much further.” (*ibid*, 96) Again, because of their upbringing, particularly in the case of women “…their voices are rarely raised in open complaint but they feel this neglect and insensitivity very deeply.” (*ibid*) And, if there are murmurings, do we take them seriously, or will the learnt image of the grumpy old person quickly leap to mind?

The other side of this stereotypical coin is the learnt assumption that an older person’s faith is a given, with no need for further nurture. Older scriptural role models can be translated uncritically into the homogenous perception of older people as always wise and serene. This can result in “…positive seeming views, such as the notion that older [people] have their faith sorted and do not have questions and doubts” (Eldred, 2003, 83); or unfair expectations of behaviour resonant with early church father Basil’s ideas where “…wandering thoughts, audacity or perturbation, make the elder woman deserve a heavier condemnation, since she is helped by her very age to be meek and quiet.”

(Basil of Caesarea in Merchant, 2003,123) Merchant argues

There is a gross myth that has gained prevalence in modern Christian thought that older people either return to the church or in some way become ‘more’ spiritual as they age, so becoming more open to specifically Christian belief. (*ibid*, 130)

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125 Compare this to an older person’s comment. “Back when we had big Sunday schools, children were not just taught parables or scripture, they were taught this whole question of relationship with God and what that involves. Your relationship with God meant that you related to your fellow people as a whole. There are very few Sunday schools now, where are they going to learn” (Eldred, 2003, 66)

126 Clarke, W.K.L. (1925) *The Ascetic Works of St Basil*. SPCK, 261, rule 82.
The first coin-side of this spiritual stereotype can lead to blunt-instrument thinking that older people need to be rapidly and overtly evangelised because death is near, while the second side can lead to a complete exclusion from mission outreach and spiritual nurture.

5. Interwoven with the church’s fears about being overwhelmed with older people, is a lack of balance at the heart of pastoral care. The report ‘Called to be old’ points out

In Britain, looking at the responses to ageing by government departments, by local authorities, and by the private and voluntary sectors, including churches, it seems that these responses often relate primarily to the vulnerability of old age. (1990, 31)

The correlation between old age and the multiple needs of increasing physical and mental deterioration, can lead to a patronising polarisation of the Church as helper and the older person as the helped. Oppenheimer remarks

It’s a pity to set up a self-defeating competition for the status of the helper rather than the helped. To be fixed in either role is diminishing. Human flourishing needs both… One way of being good to people is to accept their goodness to us…the ‘poorest poor’ or we might substitute the ‘oldest old’ are glad that they themselves can be kind to somebody. The ethics of the Christian gospel are more concerned with interdependence, bearing one another’s burdens, than with autonomy. (Oppenheimer, 2005, 9)

Churches seem stuck in their ‘top down’ understanding of caring, and do not notice, or celebrate, if a frail older member becomes more interested or prayerful in the doings of others. In those cases where ageing does decrease “…opportunities or the ability to care, the form of care an [older person] can engage in may change from “caring for” to a deeply committed “caring about.”’” (Eldred, 2003, 66) When a member of my church with Parkinson’s disease becomes prayerfully concerned about a teenager as she embarks on a gap year as part of a BMS action team, this deeply intimate and private
relationship surely weighs more in the spiritual balance than her perceived frailty and inability to speak.

6. In the current climate of existential angst, the church’s unbalanced concern for caring and the cared for becomes tangled with the prevailing tension between doing and being. In its rapidly polarising search for survival, the need to dialogue with other spiritualities, and the interiority that infers, vies with its need to be attractive to young people, and all the activity that involves. It is true that Christianity’s catalyst is the continual need for renewal, ecclesia semper reformanda est, but where the consumer society into which it speaks “…is like a race where the finishing line is moving faster than the runners” (Ward, 2002, 58) then ‘doing’ rather than ‘being’ looks favourite to lead. Ward’s interpretation of the Body of Christ as based on the charisms, gifts of God that are given as “diverse acts of service” (ibid), reflects the increasingly polarized weight given to doing in current youth ‘theology’. “…As such individuals are expected to be active, their activity is to be for the common good.” (ibid, 35) Older people who feel they no longer have a part to play become either ‘cared for’ or ‘excluded’ in this interpretation, and the resulting manic-doing solidifies the stereotype of passive age.

One of the hardest things for people who are used to being reasonably effective is to become a back number. The struggles we fought in our youth simply do not matter anymore and the comprehension we reached is no longer relevant. The things we learnt the hard way are now of no account. Honouring the old [sic] means being polite to them and trying to provide them with comfortable surroundings. It doesn’t have to mean asking them for their advice. (Oppenheimer, 2005, 5)
One of the capacity-building resources offered by the Baptist Union, ‘Fit4life’,\textsuperscript{127} uses the gym workout as an image for a healthy church. While relevantly engaging with the cultural aesthetic of a good body being a healthy body, it also excludes a large proportion of itself, if, as Oppenheimer argues, we merely treat older people decorously. While contemporary culture’s ideal of beauty has the symmetry of a Greek statue instilled, Pygmalion-like, with life by a powerful minority, there is a tragic irony as we instil older people, brimming as they are with the wild dissymmetry of real life, with the passivity of statues. Teilhard de Chardin writes of

\ldots the passivities of diminishment \ldots that slow essential deterioration which we cannot escape: old age little by little robbing us of ourselves and pushing us onwards towards the end\ldots what a formidable passivity is the passage of time…” (Teilhard de Chardin, 1960, 80, 82)

Yet ageing is not static or passive, as each generation brings its own issues and challenges, it is merely the present cultural/ecclesial pre-occupation with staying young and active that makes it appear so. From this perspective with all denominations “…already look[ing] top-heavy with older attendees” (Brown, 2000, 3) older people are reduced or disproportionately expanded to a homogenous mass weighted against and slowing down the church in its race against time. Tidmarsh argues that the perception of older people as static harms the Body’s health and self-image.

\ldots in our society, and sometimes in our churches, older people are expected to behave in a generally sedate, conservative fashion and not to be too adventurous in their pursuits or too radical in their opinions. Such factors can exert a good deal of control over behaviour and can influence an individuals perception of her/himself and abilities. (Tidmarsh, 1988, A2)

\textsuperscript{127} Baptist Union of Victoria. (2004) \textit{Fit4Life: Promoting Health for Growth.}
I would add that the very culture of doing, which the church both draws from society and interprets from its own stories, paradoxically renders it passive in the face of the fear of its own possible diminishment. The Body of Christ will only be vital if every part of it is accepted as vital, but presently it is displaying some very strange behaviour.
3. The behavioural component: what we do.

Thomas said, I need
to see the marks
of death
The hole of pain
upon his body,
I need to feel
what is not there
to believe he is alive
And Jesus came where
he wasn’t before
And said
See the marks of death
The hole of my pain
Feel what is not there
And believe I am alive\(^{128}\)

I have no problem about people being elderly. We couldn’t do
without them - we have huge numbers of volunteers and almost
all of them are elderly. The problem is that they are getting much
older and we are not sure what to do when they are too old...I
am sad, not because they are there, but if so high a percentage are
older the number under that are fewer, and the Christian faith is for
every age. The danger is that so many old folk do not seem to be
the sort of people who are the ‘storm troops’ of the church and are
therefore not necessarily engaging in evangelism. They are not doing
nothing, but they are there more for what they can get out of it, than
what they put into it, and Christianity has demands...
(Archdeacon of Coventry Cathedral, Knox, 2002, 116, my italics)

Although the Archdeacon’s comments are not representative of the whole church,
they sum up many stereotypes that express an ageism deep in its heart. Older people
are they not we, a problem to be solved, having outgrown their use and increasingly
ineffective, their growing numbers a drain on resources. According to the
Archdeacon there could be an actual limit to the acceptability of ageing. More and
more people are becoming too old, and in a culture which is constantly lowering that
limit. His language resonates with social gerontologist Braithwaite’s earlier
comments on stigmatisation, where the perceiver finds an attribute of an individual

\(^{128}\) Personal reflection
“…so unacceptable that he or she wants the bearer out of sight (Braithwaite, 2002, 318) If there is an inherent ageism within contemporary churches, it will be manifested in the way older people are stigmatised. As one of the results of stigmatisation is exclusion, then the issues will embrace what the Body of Christ is not doing and how we are not behaving towards older people. Again, the types of stigma that underpin ageist behaviour can be divided into three.

a. Loss.

As a minister I have encountered much concern and debate about how to make church more accessible to busy young people amidst the present explosion in Sunday lifestyle choices. However, the sudden changes, implosions and multiple losses which occur in the lives of older people are not, in my experience, given the same value, or the time needed in order to understand the complexities. Loss of mobility;\(^{129}\) lessening of energy or general health;\(^{130}\) loss of freedom due to medical regimes or inclement weather; loss of independence through moving to a care home; loss of a partner, friend or family member;\(^{131}\) all these losses, if not acknowledged as real life changes to be honoured, lived through alongside of and learnt from, become problems simply too large to be overcome.\(^{132}\) Instead older people often drift away from the church if they are no longer able to get there. Yet do we realise how deeply older people can suffer loss of place? Sheldrake argues that to be a person

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\(^{129}\) No longer being able to drive, losing a partner who drove, or being able to get on public transport (not that there is a great deal of that on a Sunday)

\(^{130}\) “…the current emphasis upon primary care means that fewer people are admitted to hospital and when they are it is usually for short periods. The needs of older people, therefore, can tend to be less obvious and so be overlooked by churches.” (Hammond & Treetops in Jewell, 2001, 51)

\(^{131}\) “…maybe coming to church alone when the person has enjoyed a lifetime of coming with family is too much to bear. Does anyone in the church bother to find out?” (Moffatt, 2001, 17)

\(^{132}\) Where ministers are concerned, even though much of their time is spent with older people “…comparatively little time is given in their initial training to the study of ageing and the spiritual needs and potential of people as they age” (Hector, 1988, 1) thus compounding a general lack of understanding.
…is not merely to be embodied but also to inhabit a public place. Our social selves are created for us, not just symbolically but also physically within roles determined by social, cultural and religious hierarchies as well as gender stereotypes…Human places themselves can be read as landscapes of exclusion…power is expressed in the monopolisation of central places by socially strong groups and the relegation of weaker groups in society to less desirable environments. (Sheldrake, 2000, 21)

Our sense of belonging, an essential thread in identity’s weaving, is interdependent with our sense of place.

A survey in the USA concluded that those who drop out of church wait an average six to eight weeks and if they are not missed their time will be re-engaged on other activities. Older frail people, of course do not have this option and may already be feeling very marginalised. (Moffatt, 2001, 33)

Older people may begin to feel marginalised even before they leave. In conversation with a woman who decided to leave one church for another I was sad that she did not expect to be missed from a congregation which was, in her eyes, already so lively and large. As noted, the statistics for older people leaving the church remain hidden and largely irrelevant and will continue to do so as long their losses remain as stigma in our perceptions. As long as we continue to see older people as

….unwelcome reminders of our repressed destiny. We clean them from the attics of our consciousness and set them by the curb to be collected. Or we store them in warehouses at the edge of town, until it is discovered that they have died. We have come to expect from them an early social death, in case their biological deaths should tarry. (Heinz in Knox, 2002, 52) 133

Is the Body of Christ caring to show the marks of its own suffering and loss? If not, is the Body behaving with authenticity?

b. Failure.

In Brown’s report on the impact of older people in churches she found “…an eagerness and desire to be utilised in church life.” (Brown, 2000, 28) Over a quarter of the people asked thought that “…they would develop personally if their gifts were used by the church.” (ibid) In a culture with a strong work ethic, older people want their gifts to be acknowledged and recognised, but, as this culture becomes more distorted by manic doing, the stigma of failure, the underside of success and achievement, is more often their lot. Marriage preparation classes, baptism and confirmation classes are an institution, but preparation for or the celebration of life’s later achievements and rites of passage, such as retirement, menopause, or major birthdays and anniversaries, even funerals, memorials, or death itself are not strategically resourced for or by the heart of church communities. As many wonderful stories remain untold so many negative perceptions related to age remain unchallenged.

The “…link between age and wisdom in the bible is strong…in the life of the Christian church…wisdom is presented as the consequence of age and maturity (Philippians 3:15-16) and is commended as a goal to be set before the young. (2 Timothy 2:22)” (Hilborn & Bird, 2002, 26) yet older people have sub-consciously embraced the stigma of failure. We talk freely of our senior moments in community, and blame our shortcomings on our age, but I cannot think of a single incidence of a parallel personal celebration of the positives of age as part of a long life that is a blessing from God. Yet “…it is worth underlining that many of our churches would fall apart without the wealth of talents and generous dedication of time that older

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134 In answer to the question “…please suggest one way that your church could encourage you to develop more as a person” (ibid)
people contribute.” (Jewell, 2001, 48) Is the Body of Christ celebrating the marks of its experience and long living? And if not, is the Body behaving respectfully?

c. Shame.

Shame is felt by those groups within society that are marginalised and largely excluded from positions of control and power…such marginalisation is a form of racism, and racism produces shame in its victims…shamed people are withdrawn, want to hide, and do not often ‘rock the boat’ or pose a threat. (Goodliffe, 2005, 38)

As culture and ecclesia seem to catch each other’s reflections where ageism is concerned, Goodliffe’s comments should burn through our learnt perceptions of older people. There is a close link between the stigma of failure and the stigma of shame. As older people come to feel more and more ‘out of the story’, excluded from church and society’s search for its ‘lost youth’ they become withdrawn, hidden and lose their effective voices. Simeon may be ready to die in peace, but his last prophetic words are no longer heeded and Anna’s joy no longer dances down the hallways. Indeed, in many churches, the Body’s self-expression, the ways we choose to worship exemplifies this.

Though it would be quite wrong to assume that ageing in itself necessarily leads to a nostalgic attitude to the content of worship, the pace and degree of liturgical change has been most marked in recent decades among all denominations. This has certainly made it hard for some older people to make adjustments in an area of their life where they have sought consistency, familiarity and a sense of organisational stability. (Clarke, 2001, 63)

While there is, thankfully, a growing sensitivity to the power of liturgical language, a “…growing awareness of the ways in which our use of language can hurt or demean or marginalise others” (White, 1997, 194), often perceptions of inclusivity still bow towards the young. Along with altered words, organ-free music and computer

135 Are these changes at least as radical as the move from Latin to English…and if so, have we assimilated them without a full acknowledgement of their power?
technology which can leave older people feeling bereft, when already bereaved, the perceived need to reach younger people means that

…the inappropriate versions of all-age worship can result, seemingly geared to making everything accessible to the youngest present rather than ensuring that all age-groups and sections of the church can share relevantly [leading to the feeling that] the long-standing gains of the Christian life and the essential mystery of worshipping God has been lost…because worship is a central and regular activity within every kind of Christian community, its potential and purpose are greatly diminished when older people are absent from it. (Clarke, 2001, 68)

- Absent either literally, or even while attempting to participate. As worship is the outward expression of the Body of Christ, one could argue, in the context of form, that it is thus the image or the face of the body, the conveyor of its joys and sorrows, its awe and love. And being so, worship is the potential expression, not only of the truth and justice the Christian faith embodies, but also of the visible beauty, or glory of God.

We also need the dimension of *poesis*…the ‘imaginative creation or representation of evocative images’ People do not only need truth (theory) and justice (praxis), they also need beauty, the rich resources of symbol, piety, worship, love, awe, and mystery. (Stackhouse in Bosch, 1996, 431)\(^{136}\)

Just as we can render older people place-less and gift-less in our ‘youth-archy’, so we can make them faceless. If older people cannot own the experience of worship, they become excluded from the part of the body that makes it whole. In a Mosaic antithesis, no longer belonging to community or visible as images of God, they hide their faces in shame because the glory of God cannot possibly shine from their countenances.

The greatest pain is rejection, the feeling that nobody really wants you like that’. The feeling that you are seen as ugly, dirty, a burden, of no value. That is the pain I have discovered in the heart of our

people. (Vanier in Swinton, 2003, 69)\textsuperscript{137}

Is the Body of Christ celebrating the marks of its ageing as part of its beauty, and if not, is it behaving holistically?

Conclusion

By asking the question ‘is the church ageist’ and attempting to answer through scriptural reflection, the discoveries of others, and through my own experiences, I feel I have plotted the paradigm of youth, which, in rolling together both church and culture, has scored a deep and painful groove. A groove which, if the church continues to interpret its living in terms of the need to attract the young and to be young, over against renewal and resurrection which involves suffering, loss and death, could deepen into an un-crossable, un-gospel divide between generations.

In the Middle Ages, lepers “…symbolised the dark side of existence onto which medieval people projected a variety of fears and guilt that must be excluded from the community not merely of the physically healthy but also of the spiritually pure, [they] were outcasts banished from society.” (Sheldrake, 2000, 28) Using McCann’s tripartite model to trace ecclesiastical ageism has highlighted the prejudices and fears that are often projected onto older people in our churches and the resulting stigmatisation and marginalisation that distort the Body of Christ. I do not think I am being over-dramatic in finding a resonance between contemporary society’s fear of ageing and that earlier fear of lepers. Neither am I being defeatist. Sheldrake recalls that St Francis “…through the encounter with the leper…came to see that both participation in human experiences of suffering and exclusion were at the heart of God’s incarnation as revealed in the face of the Crucified Christ.” (ibid) If, in our churches, we were to recognise and be challenged by our own ageism and thus become engaged both in the particularity of our own ageing and the positives of our older people, what could be revealed?
Our own horizons could be widened and enriched by their long views of life and its natural patterns. Octoguanarian Oppenhiemer, writes “…the normal rhythm of life, being born, maturing, letting go, is a foundation not only for human comfort, but for good theology.” (Oppenheimer, 2005, 10) Perhaps our views of life, both in community and interiority, could gain true perspective through the unique spirituality of old age, which can be a time of reconciliation and fulfilment where “…the life cycle weaves back on itself in its entirety, ultimately integrating maturing forms of hope, will and purpose, competence, fidelity, love and care, into a comprehensive sense of wisdom.” (Erikson in Mackinley, 2001,156)\textsuperscript{138}

We may be able to face our own fears by re-pacing ourselves to walk alongside those who have already lived and found meaning through uncertainty, suffering or profound despair. We could listen and learn from those who have found the courage to “…acknowledge that our lives are limited, that the universe can seem a random and meaningless place and that our lives will inevitably come to an end one day” (Lynch, 2002, 113) and yet still demonstrate faith through living constructive, creative and joyful lives in the face of life’s realities and death’s mystery. Even in this post modern era, where the “…surfaces are not landscapes but wavescapes, with the water always changing and the surfaces never the same [where] the sea knows no boundaries” (Ward, 2002, 14) we might learn to plumb the depths beneath the glittering surfaces, and contemplate the hidden tidal pulls, the ebbs and flows, and how rivers mature as they run to sea. We just might tear ourselves away from our own transfixed reflections and learn to breathe under water and begin to explore.

\textsuperscript{138} Erikson, E. H. et al. (1986) \textit{Vital Involvement in Old Age}. Norton, 55.
The river is within us, the sea is all about us...
The sea has many voices...

And under the oppression of the silent fog
The tolling bell
Measures time, not our time, rung by the unhurried
Ground swell, a time
Older than the time of chronometers, older
Than time counted by anxious worried women
Lying awake, calculating the future,
Trying to unweave, unwind, unravel
And piece together the past and the future,
Between midnight and dawn, when the past is all deception,
The future futureless, before the morning watch
When time stops and time is never ending;
And the ground swell, that is and was from the beginning,
Clangs
The bell
(T. S Eliot, The Dry Salvages, 1963, 205)
Wonderfully Made: Research Methodology

*My frame was not hidden from you
when I was being made in secret
intricately woven in the depths of the earth
your eyes beheld my unformed substance*

(Psalm 139:15-16)

At a certain time what is inevitable ripens *ie* the creative spirit …makes contact with the soul, later with other souls and awakens a yearning, an inner urge. When the conditions necessary for the maturation of a certain form are met, the yearning, the inner urge, the force, is strengthened so that it can create a new value in the human spirit that consciously or unconsciously begins to live in man*[sic]*. Consciously or unconsciously man *[sic]* tries, from this moment on, to find a material form for the spiritual form, for the new value that lives within him. (Kandinsky & Marc, 1912, 147)

So freed from the rigidity of classicism by its own original liberating spirit, and impassioned by the tracing of an ageist distortion of perception in church and culture we need to search to find forms which fit our content. Perhaps the organic spiritual beauty of the Middle Ages, or the neo-gothic story telling of Hogarth, or the time of the Baroque or the Romantics whose art was unafraid to express vulnerability and death, or we could search Christian art for the different expressions of the suffering servant Christ. But the way classicism has been used, and its resulting stigmatising shapes warns us not to be too rigidly intellectual or aesthetically symmetrical in finding form to fit the content. Paul’s Body of Christ is new life. It casts a shadow and is continuously open to change. We need to let the power of the content find itself and that will mean looking through the eyes of the weak, the dishonoured parts of the body. We will have to leave the secure and studied world of eloquent philosophers and skilful artists to find new perspectives on beauty by asking marginalised people themselves how they perceive it.
I have argued for a new and challenging perception of older people as beautiful and valued rather than unattractive and marginal and for ageing as a process to be owned and celebrated rather than feared and stigmatised; thus my research methodology needs to challenge commonly held perspectives and to respect and value the depth, and variety of experience of each older individual. My argument has been phenomenological as I have questioned the assumptions of the prevailing norms “…which seem not to correlate with [my] experience or make sense in the light of it.” (Inge, 2003, 13)

Everything I have learnt about the prevailing negative social and aesthetic attitudes towards older people in contemporary culture, and still to a large extent, the church, fuels my concern to ensure that any research concerning this group enables their voices to be heard, their faces to be seen and their presence to be felt. In doing so my methods of research will also need to challenge more traditional methodologies.

Social anthropologist, Jerrome, states,

Because society does not specify an aged role, the lives of the elderly[sic] are socially unstructured…They have no significant norms for restructuring their lives. There are no meaningful prescriptions for new goals and experience, no directions to salvation that occasionally accompany sin, loss, or failure at younger ages…Because they lack major responsibilities, society does not specify a role for the aged[sic] and their lives become socially unstructured. This is a gross discontinuity for which they are not socialised and role loss deprives them of their very social identity. (Jerrome, 1992, 2)

This perception of older people as without role or identity is so deeply rooted in the common psyche that even in the academic field of gerontology, with its focus directly upon ageing, the resulting rationally modified crop of research remains the same.

139 “Phenomenology is the study of forms in which something appears or manifests itself, in contrast to studies and seeks to explain things, say from their causal relations, evolutionary processes, theological dogma or some other first principle” (Inge, 2003, 13)
They are a lost, vulnerable cohort, with needs that will burden the rest of society far into the future.

…the lives and needs of the old [sic] are perceived from a middle-aged point of view, in which old age lacks social roles, resources and reference groups…age is a tragic extension of active life. The old[sic] are victims of social forces which contribute to their dependent nature…the research problem is defined in terms of need, the data base is the needy. (*ibid*, 1, 3)

The stream I will follow runs counter to the main flow of academic research in this area. It involves discovering how older people perceive their world in terms of beauty, what they see, rather than how the world perceives them. The methods used to acquire such information, may, in terms of traditional objective research, seem like trying to push water up hill, but by making positive experiences of older people central to the task, rather than perceived need, I hope to uncover a long disregarded source.
Beyond the accepted: choosing an appropriate methodology

Age as subject: traditional research models

Thanks to research in the field of ageing, we now understand many of the physical, psychological, social and economic aspects of the ageing process. But we have not fully answered the deeper questions emerging from our long life expectancy. Is the lengthening of human life an anomalous triumph of science and technology over purpose and meaning? (Fischer, 1998, 7)

I decided that a traditional science, technology and social sciences model of questionnaire, data collection and analysis would be inappropriate for a research process which valued older people, for the following reasons.

1. I would need to cast a wide investigative net, creating objective and de-personalising distance between myself, with power as researcher, and an already marginal and disempowered group.

2. I could oppress the people I chose to research further by giving them paperwork. “For people with their particular educational background, and possible age-related incapacities affecting sight, hearing and co-ordination, written tasks alienate rather than empower…” (Holmes, 2002, 21)

3. Questionnaires are often completed in isolation, with no opportunity for the recipients to share in their experiences, either of the research itself or the subject under investigation, thus constricting communication and compounding the actual and perceived isolation of the group.

4. As a middle-aged researcher, anything I could possibly survey will be limited by my own experience. I would be unable to formulate questions to reveal the depths and complexities of people substantially older than myself. Older people would remain data, adding to, rather than diminishing, the dehumanising idea that they are problems to be quantified and solved rather than people to be valued.
Social research on ageing is conducted within the conventional sociological research paradigm, with its emphasis on definitional rigour, hypothesis testing and quantification. The over reliance on survey methods of investigation and statistical techniques in the analysis of data ignores the uniqueness of the individual ageing process. (Jerrome, 1992, 4)

Even eschewing the survey model for the more personal interview technique, with prepared questions, would pose problems for my research.

1. Although a relationship is implied through one-to-one contact within this model, feminist writers have highlighted its implicit inequality, thus rendering it inadequate for any marginal group, and particularly inadequate for a group excluded by society on the grounds of their lack of role and dynamism.

The person who is interviewed has a passive role in adapting to the definition of the situation offered by the person doing the interviewing. The person doing the interviewing must actively and constructively construct the respondent as passive. (Oakley, 1981, 35)

2. Social anthropologists argue that direct questioning in an interview situation is often inappropriate for older people. “Old age itself is a sensitive topic for many people and in many contexts…” (Jerrome, 1992, 25) There can often be a temptation to use taboo words, which may offend or impose more harshly in a one-to-one situation than in a group.

3. As with questionnaires, some may be unable to respond to questions. “Short term memory loss, idealisation and cultural pressures to conform to a particular view make individual reports unreliable…” (ibid, 27)

4. Even a large aggregate of individual interviews could not capture adequately the dynamic variety of older people’s experience spanning broad chronologies and great change.
5. In my research, any results of the interview model, even though it includes the potential for lively and revealing conversation, will have been driven by the younger interviewer, thus de-authenticating and truncating the interviewee’s experience, and ultimately offering “…a view of ageing which is static and ahistorical, ignoring as it does the expectations brought to the situation by elderly[sic] people whose experiences span many decades of change.” (ibid, 3)

Age is the subject: Participant Observation

As my research involves an investigation into how older people perceive and thus reflect beauty, my methodology requires an aesthetic, incarnational form. I need to find a model which goes beyond the traditional homogenising methods which render older people two dimensional, static, dehumanised and distant; one which enables older people to reveal themselves, in all their complexity, as an active and dynamic part of the body of Christ. My model involves taking a resonant chord of current thinking in social anthropology which…

Offers an insight into what might be called ‘normal ageing’ as distinct from the pathological experience of the few in receipt of services, casualties of the welfare state. It goes beyond the majority of contemporary accounts in attending first to subjective experience. The analysis is guided by the meanings attached to relationships and events by the elderly[sic] participants in the study…(ibid, 5)

Then weaves it with the chords of hierarchy-challenging, inclusive liberation theology, and feminist theology, which questions systems of authority that “…make received symbols dictate what can be experienced as well as the interpretation of that

140 Social anthropology provides the basis for recent research conducted in the health sector, where it has been discovered that “…stories and dialogues can form the basis of study or research… [and who have opted for] …the participatory method over ‘explanation’ through formal hypothesis testing.” (Centre for Health Action Research and Training, 2002, 3) Thus my choice of participation observation as a research method is “…one of pragmatism as well as integrity…as much of the church’s work with older people is on the health services interface [so] learning to listen to them in such a way could become an area for dialogue.” (Holmes, 2002, 24)
which is experienced…if a symbol does not speak authentically to experience, it becomes dead, or must be altered to provide new meaning.” (Radford Ruether, 1983, 12)

Instead of a distant view ‘from above’ and inauthentic symbols which traditional methodologies could provide, “participant observation” (Bell, 1999, 157) as favoured by social anthropology, provides a more subjective, inclusive view through work in group situations, which are “…a central feature of human society [permeating and mediating] a large part of our experience of growing up and being grown up, of work and play.” (Doel & Sawdon, 1999, 11)

I chose to conduct my research through observation within groups in anticipation of the following benefits.

1. More potential for integration for those who have become isolated than traditional models as people naturally form into groups on a multiplicity of levels, from family and friends, neighbours and communities, to teams, citizens and nations. Research will feel less forced or threatening if it bases its structure on a natural desire for the company of others, and an innate sense of belonging.

2. If being part of a group is a natural, and subjective experience, then so is the experience of ageing. “Groups can bring not just a sense of belonging but a deeper sense of meaning…” (Doel, 2006, 30) The opportunity communicating within a group provides, to tell stories, reminisce, connect with faith, history,

society and each other, means older people’s experiences are no longer on the
edge.

Those daily acts of speech and gesture do much more than simply
transmit information. Each one contains the seeds of whole
dramas of contested history and value-making, huge assumptions
about what makes sense and what doesn’t. They create and sustain
bonds of identity, while simultaneously opening up to what is new.
(Shakespeare & Rayment-Pickard, 2006, 42)

Life is meaningful and older people are meaningful within it.

3. There is a reduction of hierarchy and a reclaiming of identity for a group
denied a sense of self through ageism.

Groups address issues of power head on. They are powerful in
themselves; the power can be used for better or worse, it can be
shared or withheld, but its potential and its presence are undeniable.
Groups can provide a more effective environment to experience
empowerment because they can be used to replicate or simulate
larger society. (Doel, 2006, 13)

In an interview situation I, as a younger person in a position of perceived
authority, could privately impose upon or disempower another individual. In a
group, being semi-public and with the participants outnumbering the
researcher, the researcher serves the group. The group provides the research
experience with greater potential for equality, “…an especially attractive
feature of groupwork is its capacity to position group members’ knowledge at
the heart of professional practice.” (ibid, 27) Older people are not the objects
of research, they are its driving force, and their directly experiential knowledge
becomes “…a deep and essential resource, the very reason for bringing people
together in the first place.” (ibid) Thus there is an enhanced opportunity for
dialogue, resonating with liberation theology. Like Freire’s liberating
education “…there is no longer one who thinks, who knows, standing in front
of the others who admit they don’t know.” (Freire, 1990, 9) Rather, the group
situation and activities within it enable me to listen and observe the flow of free association of ideas where 

…one person says one thing, somebody else says another thing. We tend to think this approach has little value, but actually it... is better than [any] logical method...[as it] helps people to discover things for themselves. (Mesters, 1990, 20)

Not only does the group offer their own experiences as the main resource, but they also enable each other on the journey of further discovery.

4. Groupwork is a way of enabling out-grouped people to have a voice.

“…groupwork practice has a rich tradition of listening to and acting on the voice of people whose knowledge has been considered peripheral, and of helping people to motivate and mobilise.” (Doel, 2006, 28) Groupwork is dynamic rather than static. As well as enabling journeys of discovery, being inter-relational inspires people to question and challenge the nature of those journeys.

5. The use of groups is appropriate to the research subject,

…within the primary group of kin, friends and neighbours - members of the peer group - assume importance at certain phases of life. One of them is the onset of old age. The loss of income and increase in leisure at retirement is likely to promote primary group ties with peers, who have similar life experiences, expectations and tastes...Peer grouping is a mechanism whereby deprived people associate with others similarly deprived, hence reducing the sense of deprivation and exposure to people who might reinforce it. (Jerrome, 1992, 15)

Rather than simply enabling lonely people to come together to discover a sense of meaning and empowerment in their lives, which could actually be the patronising other-side-of-the-coin of reinforcing deprivation, groupwork is the choice of respect and authenticity for a group of people who are naturally drawn towards each other as a positive way of dealing with life’s changes.
Groupwork is appropriate to the research context. One group, to which older people are drawn as part of their life experiences, is the church. However, even here, they can become diaspora communities around the edges of a more youthful centre. To gather older people into a group for participant observation may help them not only to reclaim their rightful public space but also create “alternative territories” (Graham in Sheldrake, 2000, 22) they can call their own.

By using groups resonant with the social anthropology model and informed by feminist and liberation theology, I can ensure that the older people themselves remain central in my research. Whereas in sociological field-work relationships produce data, in anthropological research the relationships between researcher and informants are the data. Rather than using a research instrument the participant observer becomes the research instrument. (Jerrome, 1992, 29)

However, as research instrument, in order to strike consistently the most harmonious notes, I also have to keep central certain responsibilities as the participant observer. This subjective research method is based on the notion of the quality of the knowledge gained through observation and being such has meant that results from such methods have been criticised for being “…biased, impressionistic, idiosyncratic and lacking in the precise quantifiable measures that are the hallmark of survey research and experimentation.” (Bell, 1999, 157) The social anthropologist’s counter to this, predicate to my own observations, is that…

Discussion of subjectivity and bias through personal involvement have very little place. In anthropological research the core problem is not validity but interpretation…methodology is the internal apprehension of relationships and their transformation

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143 “Many thinkers have criticised the claims made for scientific research methods on the grounds that science itself is a social product, that scientists are socially situated human beings with partial vision and that no scientific method ensures access to some incontrovertible truth.” (Ramazanoglu, 2002, 44)
through sets of cultural meanings. The goal of fieldwork is to gain an insight into the construction of meaning by the people under study. This can be achieved only by participating in the process of meaning construction. The important skill in fieldwork therefore is not to become integrated but to be able to reflect on experience. What is of significance is the competence of introspection. (Holy in Jerrome, 1992, 29)

I have the responsibility to listen and report with integrity, to be aware of the level of subjectivity involved and of my own place within the group. Unlike social anthropology participant observers I am privileged to have access already to the groups I am researching, as a person recognised as forming those groups and working within them. My role in building relationships becomes part of the research but I need to keep a conscious balance between being a subjective part of the group and its co-ordinator. I will need tact, patience, gentleness, empathy and humour. Mester’s liberation theology advice is important.

You must have a deep and delicate touch. You must try and feel as they would and intuit their possible reactions…The people should be allowed to grow from the soil of their own faith and their own character. They should not be dragged along by our aggressive questions. (Mesters, 1990, 21)

As noted, there will be inconsonance between my age and the ages of the group. As a member of the culture I am critiquing, I have to be doubly careful to continually check my own assumptions. I cannot let any socially conditioned, residual ageism “…interfere with my perception of what [is] happening, and my interpretation of the material and thereby influence social processes in ways I [would] not appreciate.” (Jerrome, 1992, 31) The disciplines of social anthropology, feminist and liberation theologies follow a similar furrow in believing that “…things are never what they seem, and in addition to what people say or do, there is always something else going on.” (ibid) I must be aware of what it is going on beneath my own surfaces as well as

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others’, for, given the nature of my argument, any skewing of my interpretation through fear or postulation, would render it null and void.

Similarly I need to be sensitive to any gender issues within the groups. One of the characteristics of the ageing demographic is that women outnumber men. However, the first gerontological studies were male-based and disregarded the stories of women. Given the numbers of older women, especially concentrated in my particular church setting, where women are already in a majority, it would be easy to swing to the other extreme, ignoring the male experience of ageing or aesthetic perception. Indeed, concerning the latter, in my historical analysis I have found that, albeit in a way that renders and keeps them passive, most ideas of beauty have been projected onto the young female form. So much so that “…women are seismographs for changes in culture, and their bodies are the places where conflicts become unmistakably evident.” (Moltmann-Wendel, 1994, 9) However, with the standing down of Sir Menzies Campbell as leader of the Liberal Party in 2007, amidst a cloud of media-fuelled age issues, we see in the twenty first century, for the first time, men more clearly being pressurised by media, commerce and other power systems to join the fight against the ageing process. Thus, to be authentically contextual, I need to be sensitive to gender within my groups, “…taking into account the distinctiveness of experience for older men and women” (Jerrome, 1992, 6) where appropriate, while showing that the participating men and women are a still an accurate gender reflection of their cohort.

145 “Gender has not often been addressed directly in studies of ageing. Early work, often arising from studies of the impact of retirement from paid work, reflected a masculine bias in ignoring women’s experiences.” (Jerrome, 1992, 4)
146 “He must be thinking how much better it would have been if he had not planned and plotted and eventually seized the leadership with his shaking hands…as he practiced his roar, the applause rose. Yet even as they clapped, most of the audience were thinking he was clapped out” (Levy, 2007, 1-2)
Not only do I need to be careful about not imposing my own belief systems on the group, but I also need to remain open to being changed by the group. In retaining my awareness of my own position within the group regarding issues of power, gender and age, my hope is that my methodology will create new relationships and perceptions within the groups, including myself, and that the research itself will be re-formed to be more aesthetically appropriate to the experiential reality of older people.

In groups the professional groupworker is expert at groupwork and the group members are experts in their own lives. This does not diminish professional expertise, it recasts it. (ibid, 13)
Aesthetics of methodology: structure.

The use of groups for research allows for events and experiences to be structured appropriately to the subject and resulting responses to be analysed and interpreted. The group itself becomes an aesthetic event offering entry into the experience of older people as the body of Christ.

Research will consist of four three-part group events, with four or five people around a table, recorded verbatim for analysis and interpretation. In each part I will ask what forms do we perceive as beautiful; do we include ourselves in our perceptions of beauty and if so how.

Each part begins with a time of silent prayer and stillness, at the end of which I will read a passage of Scripture.

**Genesis 1: 25-28: image of God.**

Each participant is then given a ball of clay to make a model of their own face and asked to comment on their experiences.

**Psalm 139: being wonderfully made.**

The participants are then shown a range of photographic portraits, of differing ages and gender, and asked to say which ones they find attractive and why.

**Luke 12: 22-24, 27-28: considering the lilies of the field.**

The participants are then shown a range of photographs of landscapes and asked to say which ones they find attractive and why.\(^{147}\)

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\(^{147}\) I chose mostly photographs over paintings as I felt an artist’s style or character might distract the participants from the subject. The random nature of my choices of portrait and landscape would hopefully reflect the subjective and arbitrary nature of human experience, while the fact that they had caught my eye, meant I would be sharing my own particular experiences.
Although I have no control over the subjective responses of participants, the structure of each group needs to be consistent. Thus, whatever occurs within any group, the order will not alter. Also I need to reiterate the same ground rules to each group regarding time keeping and confidentiality.

**Justification of structure**

For an authentic participant observation, the structure of research needs to have the consistency and specificity to enable accuracy in recording, at the same time as the flexibility and capacity to hold and respect the expected range and complexities of response. Also “…the semi public nature of groupwork means that the consequences of poor preparation and shortcuts are much more visible than work with individuals.” (Doel, 2006, 46) Thus thorough preparation is necessary. A group structure is certainly appropriate for the subject but the following aspects within this structure are needed for the most creative fulfilling of my objectives.

a. Pilot group.

An initial group of church members who work alongside older people, whose care, opinions and experience I respect and whose critique will help to hone the final structure of my research.

b. Written invitation.

I will formally invite my participants from within my own church setting, giving positive emphasis to the active roles older people play in society, and respecting the choice they have in the ways they give their time. Initially I will target known friendship groups within the church, but as some will be unable to take up the
invitation, I anticipate my groups will become more mixed, leading to more social interaction, and the building up of new relationships. Thus, hopefully, the groups will take on the nature of a new and enjoyable life event.

The wording of the invitation and conversations initiated with potential research participants prior to the research event will prepare the participants for the experience. My aim is to create interest while maintaining clarity in order to avoid any feelings of confusion or coercion.

c. Timing.

My choice of late morning, spanning an hour and a half, was made in consideration of energy levels, which tend to dip, regardless of age, in the afternoon, and also of anticipated concentration spans, of both researcher and participants. A morning session also gives me more time to record my initial comments and observations.

d. Research setting.

The consideration of both invitation and timing anticipates an atmosphere of hospitality and inclusivity that is important to maintain within the groups, in order for them to feel they are a dynamic and integral part of God’s community, the body of Christ. Likewise the research setting would be informal, in a home, normally my own, in good light and around a table, evoking both ordinariness and sacrament. The table enables all participants to be seated at the same level, thus the ability to hear each other is retained and eye contact maintained.\(^{148}\)

\(^{148}\) The table creates a circle which is “…symbolic of Cosmos and resonates with spiritual awareness of creation…for Christians the cosmic person is Christ who reconciles all things…so that even though it may be only two or three people who are gathered together he is there in the middle of them, as an axe on whom the wheel of life turns…[and] challenges and comforts us…calling on us to abandon our existential isolation.” (Grainger, 2003, 32-33)
Travelling to my home helps to present older people positively as active and mobile. Placing the research setting so that they would not have had to move, would have been simpler, but would add to the false perception of older people as static and needing to be served. Even where the research may have to take place in the home of one of the participants, due to restrictions in mobility, I anticipate this as an empowering event where they will be able to offer hospitality and the space to enable the event to take place.

e. Scripture.

Use of biblical narrative grounds the research in incarnation theology, thus bringing the diaspora into the heart of the body of Christ. Positive attitudes to groupwork outlined through liberation theology are informed by the use of scripture in marginal groups. By asking older people about their perceptions of beauty in a biblical framework, they will hopefully make connections that will draw them closer into God’s story. Regarding my methodology, as in regard to any use of scriptural interpretation, and resonating closely with my humility towards the experiences of the participants, I will have to adopt a “…proviso of ‘hermeneutic humility’…respect for the fundamental incommensurability of the text [thus accepting] that all interpretation of Scripture is provisional, and is made in the knowledge that many other, equally serious interpretations are possible.” (Shakespeare & Rayment-Pickard, 2006, 15)

The act of reading of scripture slowly, inviting the listener to become the observer inside the story, is a combination of lectio divina “…holy reading…reading very slowly through a passage until a particular phrase ‘lights up and attracts the reader’”, (Smith, 1989, 117, 106, 132); Ignatian spirituality’s practice of “…using the power of the imagination’s free reign to bring the scene to life within yourself as the
participant” (ibid) and gazing, “contemplative prayer with images.” (ibid) Thus, in a more interior way, the participant integrates more fully and perceives more openly as part of Christ’s body, and the layers of any knowledge imparted are deepened considerably.

f. Play.

The element of play is “…core to successful groupwork, difficult to establish in individual work and often not considered explicitly.” (Doel, 2006, 31) It is authentic to subject in its borrowing from the inclusive, playful, perfection-eschewing methodology of art therapy.

Art therapy uses art as a means of personal expression to communicate feelings, rather than aiming at aesthetically pleasing end products to be judged by external standards. This means of expression is available to everyone, not just the artistically gifted. (Liebmann, 2004, 7)

Older people and play is not a contemporary cultural correlation. Older people only appear to enjoy themselves if the market forces deem their activities to be economically viable, and then only the ‘young-old’. For those of great age, patronisation, ignorance or fear can often twist any child-like or playful behaviour into a possible symptom of dementia. The kinaesthetic experience of handling clay; being able to make a mess; to give form to their imaginations; to reconnect with their own childhood experiences, their own faces and forms; or even learn a new skill, involves all the fun of personal freedom.

The significance of play for children is well-rehearsed…children usually have more opportunities for play in their everyday lives, but the group may open up new kinds of play in which they can explore different aspects of their ‘self’…it is about fun and spontaneity, performing and even pretending…Play can be frivolous, but it can also allow a group to approach and deal with difficult and painful topics. (ibid, 31, 91)
If I am challenging a group, deemed invisible or unattractive by society, about their self-perceptions in terms of beauty, I need a way that is not threatening, patronising or confusing. If I am asking about their beauty and form, my method has to be creative and participatory. Art-based researcher McNiff “…points out that the process of art often uncovers something different from the reasoning mind, so it has the potential to provide another route to research.” (McNiff in Liebmann, 2004, 67) As well as enhancing the dynamic of the research process by “…providing an activity that all [even those who find it difficult to talk] can engage in…by…equalising participation within the group, [and offering] a different dimension from the purely verbal,” (ibid, 13) the use of clay occupies hands while imaginations, frustrations and fears are unconsciously released. More than a simple icebreaker, kinaesthetic activity works as a significant boundary breaker towards deep cohesion for fractured and defensive people of any age group, yet all experienced in an environment of safety and choice.

One of the most valuable qualities of art therapy and personal art is the provision of a parallel frame of reference to real life in which different ways of being can be tried out without any real-life consequences. Small risks can be attempted before large ones. (ibid, 20)

An important part of this safe environment offered through play is the enabling of humour, the grounding, in my opinion, for any work on self-image, and also authentic to the group mechanics of the research subjects.

If the world watch them less for being old, they watch each other more…Moreover, in a society that raises an eyebrow to those who ‘do not act their age’ the subculture encourages the old[sic] to sing, to flirt, to joke…They show one another how to be. (Jerromme, 1992, 15)

Clay play is not simply a research catalyst enabling older people a release through the connection with their childhood, or through the uncovering of layers of life

experience, it also allows for their joy in being who they are in the present. It is a “…vital source of information about…the meanings attached to old age.” (ibid, 25)

g. Silence.

In anticipating that play will engender periods of silent concentration within the groups, I must be prepared to accept these as positive.

1. Being silent together can be intrinsic to building trusting relationships, facilitating an authentic opening up of dialogue.

2. Silence is another source of subject knowledge. Older people are used to silence, and giving room for this respects their ability to be quiet and think slowly.

3. The slowing down of communication enables the observer more time to engage at deeper levels.

4. Being silent can be powerfully counter-cultural. “Silence is often related to the operation of power and is a sign of the existence of conflict…” (Batsleer, 1994, 185) However, working silently together and separately at the same time in a safe environment gives it another quality.

The term ‘keeping silent’ suggests a deliberate act of retention. There is a difference between keeping silent and being silent. Being silent implies a sense of restful security derived from just being here in the group. (ibid)

Society’s perception of older people as without voice, or ‘silent as the grave’, compounded by fear of silence as a language of power and control, is potentially transforming where groups of older people work together in the mutual silence of creativity.
h. Inclusion of breaks.

“Although the group usually sees this as ‘time out’ in fact it is very much a part of the group process…” (Doel, 2006, 67) The anticipated off-subject conversations, the rests between activities, the cups of tea “…give group members a rounder picture of each other.” (ibid)

i. Portraits.

My social analysis reveals that post-modern culture is sensual and visual.

Enlightenment centrality of thought has given way to the body taking centre stage in our consciousness. Thus to be contextual, my research will involve subjective response to visible form. Feminist theologian Moltmann-Wendel believes that visual dialogue is universal as well as contemporary.

The eye proved to be an organ on which excessive demands are made on modern society…From ancient times, many ideas of knowledge have been connected with images of seeing. Seeing is the sense of knowledge. Those who have not seen through something have not learned anything. (Moltmann-Wendel, 1994, 91)

She states that because they almost always involve the machinations of the media, these

…visual images are remarkably disembodied [but]… contemplation [as involved in my research]…is the forgotten culture of the eyes. Contemplation does not isolate the eyes so that they become penetrating guardians of order or analysts. Contemplation lets the eyes be involved in nature so that we can see ourselves illuminated by the light of nature. (ibid)

By asking older people to look upon beauty and comment, thus reconnecting a cohort rendered invisible by society to the visible, I am hoping to offer the opportunity for them to communicate new and transforming perceptions about themselves and the world.
Eyes meet. The contemplation of each other’s face is innate. It is the form by which we immediately perceive ourselves, and others.

The face is the place of the smile, where the message of love is read. We perceive the world, with its smiles and its threats, not in the abstract, but in faces with expressions on them, in things and in places. (Tournier, 1968, 27)

To behold another’s face is to connect to our unique sense of being in proximity to others and the responsibility that engenders.

Unreplaceable in responsibility, I cannot, without defaulting, incurring fault, or being caught up in some complex, escape the face of my neighbour, here I am pledged to the other, naked and without resources. The nakedness of someone forsaken shows in the cracks of the mask of the personage, or in his [sic] wrinkled skin, his [sic] being ‘without resources’ has to be heard like cries not voices or thematised, already addressed to God…My responsibility, in spite of myself - which is the way the others’ charge falls upon me - is the hearing or understanding of this cry. It is awakening. (Levinas, 1975, 143)

More than offering aesthetic judgements according to culture’s code of beauty for interpretation and critique, Levinas’ metaphor suggests that, through the contemplation of each other’s faces through the medium of clay, and through photographic portraits, the subjects themselves could re-enter life’s picture at a profound interpersonal level. This will be interpreted through a theological framework as the groups explore what it means for them to be created in the image of God.

j. Landscapes.

All the above takes place within an environment.

Life is not an abstraction. To exist is to occupy a particular living-space to which one has the right. (Tournier, 1968, 25)

Sheldrake reiterates this sense of place and describes the challenges and injustices of the human state in ways resonant with older people.
To be a person is not merely to be embodied but also to inhabit a public place. Our social selves are created for us, not just symbolically but also physically within roles determined by social, cultural and religious hierarchies as well as gender stereotypes.

Human places themselves can be read as places of exclusion... power is expressed in the monopolisation of central places by socially strong groups and the relegation of weak groups in society to less desirable environments. (Sheldrake, 2000, 21)

I am conducting my research within groups to create alternative territories for those who have been excluded from public spaces in this way, thus the landscapes I provide for aesthetic contemplation should be consonant. The aesthetics of Duns Scotus provides the philosophical grounding for perceiving nature and natural form as the appropriate territory for exploration. “Scotus, like a good Franciscan, felt that the variety of the natural world finds its aesthetic unity in the love God has for God’s creation...” (Garcia-Rivera, 1999, 29) His concept of heacceitas or ‘thisness’ involved understanding the particularity of the individual within this unity, beauty in all its variety. “ ‘Thisness’ expresses the absolute inclusivity of God that draws all things together within difference...” (Sheldrake, 2000, 28)

Garcia-Rivera, writing on theological aesthetics from a Latin American liberation theology viewpoint, states that Duns Scotus’ philosophy was the first departure in centuries of “…theological appropriation of the Platonic form” (Garcia-Rivera, 1999, 29) thus resonating with my own searching beyond the contemporary neo-platonic aesthetic for other forms of beauty which describe older people authentically. By asking my subjects to contemplate and describe the beauty of different natural landscapes I am hoping that they will be able to connect their own selves with the beauty from which they have long been excluded.
k. Control group.

To compare, contrast and highlight the older groups’ responses, I will include one group of young adults. The experiences of younger cohorts would be too different to warrant comparison, and older cohorts may have too many similarities to highlight contrast.

k. Journalling.

In recognition of the sensitive involvement and self-awareness which participant observation demands, as part of my preparation I will keep a journal of my own experiences of form and beauty. Journalling will aid my choice of pictures for research and oil the interpretive process. Keeping a journal also reminds me of the tentative and exploratory nature of formulating subjective research.

At a loss, I return to my comfort zone, reading and making notes, even though I know I may not be using this as part of historical analysis, rather as a basis of future research, or perhaps a bridge between both - it’s hard building bridges into mid air, when you are not quite sure where the air ends and the other solid side begins. (Journal, September 2006)

My research, finding its critique in traditional methodology, is structured on models, which though relatively new, are becoming more established and interdisciplinary. It finds its aesthetic ethos within both modern phenomenology and medieval philosophy, its spirit in the ancient art of contemplation, and its grounding in Scripture. As, the old teacher in Ecclesiastes says “There is nothing new under the sun.”150 However, my subject, the experiences of older people, demands that I explore new and uncharted territories; both in respect to their relative exclusion from contemporary thinking, “…working with older people has unfortunately tended not to be associated with creative methods, or an imaginative approach” (Thompson, 1995, 90) and in

150 Ecclesiastes 1:9.
consideration of the nature of great age itself as “terra incognita.” (Simmons, 2001, 70) I am starting from the opposite pole to questionnaire-based research where I would have decided exactly what I needed to find out before setting out, thus I am truly researching something I do not know. In researching through participant observation I am entering a creative process, a journey into the unknown. All I know at this point is that some form of theological reflection authentic to the expressions and experience of the research participants and speaking into the context of contemporary culture will follow the group sessions. Dorothy L Sayers states that “…the creator does not set out from a set of data and proceed, like a cross-word solver or student of elementary algebra, to deduce from them a result which shall be final, predictable, complete and the only one possible…but to fashion a synthesis which includes the whole dialectic in a manifestation of power.” (Sayers, 1941, 52) My subject matter demands that I stay creative, journeying with older people in free-flowing openness into the formless dark, yet trusting that what I am experiencing is the formlessness before the form and the darkness before the dawn.
Research Project: through older people’s eyes

Group 1

Glenda sixty-four, married, mother
Audrey fifty-six, married, mother, grandmother
Shirley sixty-one, widowed
Carol forty-seven, single
Joyce seventy six, widowed, mother, grandmother

Part 1: Clay

After the stilling exercise everyone attempted modelling in an ebb and flow of conversation and periods of concentrated quiet, during which patterns emerged.

1. Reminiscence. Joyce was reminded of papier-mâché making and knitting.

2. Humour. There was laughter and self-deprecation of their own modelling skills. Joyce joked that hers looked like something from outer space, Glenda was amused by the size of her nose and Shirley suggested that we should try this at the Wednesday Fellowship group.

3. Self-awareness. Joyce and Glenda talked about having their eyebrows plucked, Joyce anticipating that it would give her a lift. There was a general swapping of information about hairdressers.

4. Awareness of each other. As the faces took shape beneath their hands the group talked openly about their problems, families and experiences, listening, encouraging and being generally supportive of each other. Carol was positive about the others’ models.

5. Comments about the finished models. The participants talked about the features they had included as their most prominent or most accepted - glasses, noses, ears, eyes and wrinkles. The features they disliked in themselves, so had left out, included spots, blemishes, and eyes because they “…are not as
nice as they used to be.” (Joyce) Every finished clay face had a smile, reflecting how they laughed at themselves, but also how often they put on a brave face.

Joyce remarked, “When there’s nobody about I let my face down but put a smile on when I see people.” There were no connections with being made in God’s image.

At this point we washed our hands.

Comment.

There was an overall reticence regarding talking about the way they looked, although Joyce and Glenda were able to laugh at themselves. Joyce laughed about her wrinkles, and in doing so owned them, but no one else talked in this way. All found it easy to talk about negative aspects of themselves, their self-awareness was pragmatic but no one commented on their colouring, or their hair, apart from Audrey who nearly forgot to put it in. There was a general tendency towards self-effacement and a hint of sadness behind the smile.

2. Portraits

After the stilling exercise, in response to the question “which of these faces do you like the best, which are beautiful to you or immediately attract you and why”, there was an immediate change of mood. Everyone enjoyed looking at the pictures and became animated and talkative.

151 Appendix D.
Responses.

1. The group was much more ready to talk about how they perceived beauty in others.

2. The expression ‘looking’ was used frequently.

3. Most of the positive comments were for the younger faces, the more classically beautiful ones, or for oriental serenity. Audrey liked the little boy who “looks like a rogue.” (D9) The young girl (D6) was for Joyce and Audrey in turn, “enquiring” and “cute.” The most classical beauty, the woman who, in my eyes, resembles Michelangelo’s David (D11) was connected with royal iconography, by Carol’s “this looks like Diana.”

4. Although the older woman (D10) caused the most comment, much of it was negative, old age being connected with sadness, suffering and passive waiting. This was well intentioned and informed by their experiences of caring for older relatives. I was intrigued by Glenda’s connection between grey hair and severity, “Sheila Hancock looks severe, probably because her hair is grey.” (D8) Ageing appears threatening and devoid of humour.

When asked to pick a favourite, Audrey chose the young girl (D6), Glenda “…the Chinese lady” (D14), Shirley, the young boy (D9) and Carol, “…the ginger middle aged lady” (D3) whose smile she liked. Only Joyce, the eldest, saw positives in the older people, looking into eyes and finding twinkles, fun and laughter (D20), and chose as her favourite (D19) “Mrs wrinkled and wonderful, because I have to have a smile and a really happy face when I’m that old”

152 Glenda “…it’s a sad face, you can see the realisation of age in it, it’s a sad life when it gets to that stage, just sitting and waiting”
Audrey “…it looks as though she’s had a hard life”
3. Landscapes

After the stilling exercise, the group were asked to pick the landscapes that attracted them most, or seemed the most beautiful.

Responses.

1. Of the natural landscapes offered, only Carol chose a fresh, new form as most attractive “…because I like flowers.” (E8) The rest chose ancient rocks or woodland paths.

2. They became eloquent in their descriptions of the beauty of place. Audrey heard water, and sensed peace and solitude in her favourite place. Carol liked “…this rock close up, its colourful.” Joyce described the woodland (E3), her favourite place, as “…peaceful, tranquil, cool.”

3. Spiritual connections with landscape were made more easily than with portraits. Conversation flowed from sacred place to sacred space. Glenda expressed respect for the sea and she was “drawn to mountains” as her favourite. Joyce connected landscape to her faith journey in (E7)

... this one with the mountains says to me “Jesus rock on which I stand.” You can hide in this rock, for shelter and protection.

4. Landscape and remembering were a correlate. For Glenda “…rock and water are powerful, they remind me of my youth, walking and rock climbing.” For Joyce “…this wall reminds me of Jesus being the basis rock and we build on it.”

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153 Appendix E.

154 Shirley, a very private person, did not comment much on the landscapes but chose a castle high on a hill as her favourite place.

155 Audrey “This is a quiet place to be on your own, nice, with flowing water.” (E1) “…just hearing the water flowing down the rocks.” (E10)

156 The pictures inspired closing conversations about their own experience of places of worship, the peace of Greek churches for Glenda, overwrought English cathedrals for Joyce, and chilly local parish churches for Shirley, and Audrey’s wish to have her ashes scattered on the sea.

157 Glenda “I have great respect for water, and with the sea. It can be peaceful on top, but you just don’t know what’s going on underneath.”
There appears to be a more powerful sense of place than of face for the research participants, causing me to wonder, if those descriptions of ancient places in creation were conferred to older people, as God’s creatures, in God’s image, would we be seeing older people and describing them as powerful, peaceful, deep, awesome, dangerous, colourful, inspiring of memory and imagination, reminiscent of Jesus, close to experience and the places we want to be?
1. Clay

Everyone attempted the modelling. Peggy has arthritis in her hands and the need to make her clay workable led everyone to take time kneading their clay. There was a great sense of fun with much laughter woven through conversation, and quieter times of concentration. Emerging patterns were

1. Reminiscence. Working the clay reminded Lillian of physiotherapy after a broken wrist. Conversation later turned to loved ones they had lost.

2. Comments on their work in progress. Much laughter and self-deprecation. Norah immediately tackled her wrinkles, was accused by Peggy of “…not using your Oil of Ulay” and stated that her model “…looks like something that has crawled out of a piece of wood.”

3. Self-awareness. Lillian connected the expression on her model’s face with her own present mood, “…mine’s a bit sad, its how I feel today.” Peggy said profoundly, “…this is a self-portrait.”

4. Awareness of each other. The group’s encouragement of each other’s work was equal to their self-deprecation. Lillian thought her grandson would say, “…I look like an alien, a man from outer space.”

5. Comments on the finished models. Conversations widened as the work formed under their hands, then focussed on the expressions of their created faces. Lillian was the only one not to have made her model smile. “Mine is a

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158 Peggy “You’re making a nice shape. I’ve got a flat head. Lillian “ No you haven’t!”
bit gloomy, I look how I feel.” Maureen responded with “…we will cheer you up” and the other participants lightened the mood by joking about their own and each other’s models.159

6. In dialogue the group connected making their clay images with being made in the image of God. In response to Lillian’s “…I made mine how I feel” and Norah’s “…I made mine to make people laugh,” Maureen concluded “ …so you could say we are in God’s image because we are doing something which makes each other happy.”

They all agreed they needed to be cheered up because of the losses in their lives. Conversation turned to anniversaries of deaths of husbands and children. Lillian commented that she had felt much better since becoming part of the church community.

While talking and reminiscing, they all shared one towel to wipe their hands.

Comment.

In this mutually supportive group the clay modelling was a very moving experience. They began by expressing cultural norms, wrinkles were mentioned, plus ways to get rid of them, but surfaces were broken through quickly. I felt they held the way they looked, their perceived forms, lightly and were more interested how their expressions reflected their state of mind and each other’s. The activity was laughter-filled, with much self-deprecation, but they used their sense of fun positively, for solidarity, upholding Lillian who was struggling that day. Their smiles were for each other.

159 Norah “…mine is like a monster!”
Peggy “…it looks like a gargoyle!”
Norah “I could bake that and put it in the garden!”
Also Maureen’s connecting their sense of fun with God’s image shed a beautiful light on the whole group.

2. Portraits.

Responses.

1. The group engaged by giving each face a story, grounded in their own life experiences. Lillian narrated, “…she looks like she’s lived a lot and still remembers it all, she’s had a happy life (D2) but (D10) looks sorrowful, like she’s worked hard.” The expressions of their eyes were important in helping to tell these stories.  

2. The cultural comments on (D4) revealed a complexity of attitude to race. Their reminiscing about how such a face would have been unattractive to them in their youth, to the point of fear, was the basis for their perceptions of his sadness, loneliness and need to communicate. Their comments revealed, not the cultural stereotype of older people as racist, but rather a feeling of culpability, humility, empathy and a story of change. An example of the portraits revealing the beauty of the beholder!

3. Conversations regarding Mary (D17) revealed different religious sensibilities. The idea of her pure, and in this case aesthetic, beauty as the catalyst for shame and self deprecation through Norah’s “…she makes me feel as though I shouldn’t be looking at her, because I’m not good enough,” possibly traces a deeply ingrained perfectionist teaching, over against the ideal image of God and of all being equal parts of Christ’s Body.

160 Maureen “I’m trying to read his eyes, he looks so sad with the world.” (D4)
161 Norah “When I was a little girl black men used to scare me, now it’s different.”
Lillian “You just didn’t see many.”
Norah “He’s saying ‘I’m the same as you, don’t judge me.’”
Lillian “I’m me, I’m human, you can talk to me.” (D4)
4. Many of their comments on age aligned with contemporary culture. Great age was connected with hard lives and suffering. Of (D10) Norah says “…it’s such a shame when they grow old like that,” but Lillian thinks she is still beautiful “…in a way.” Happiness and attractiveness was an important connection for them.162 Peggy, challenged by idea of finding a favourite amongst such diverse faces, eventually picked (D12) “…because she looked so happy.”

5. Innocence and beauty also resonated. Although not consciously aesthetic in their judgements, the more symmetrical oriental face was considered beautiful, and innocent. “The oriental lady is so beautiful…” said Maureen, who found her the most attractive, “…she’s so innocent, her eyes are full of wonder.”(D14)

6. The love of one generation for another was evident as the younger portraits reminded them of their grandchildren. For Lillian “…the little lad is gorgeous, he’s beautiful, you could pick him up and hug him” (D9)

When asked to choose their favourites, there was a balance between young and middle aged, but all picked younger than themselves except Lillian who tentatively saw beauty in an older face.163

3. Landscapes.

Responses.

1. The participants immediately put themselves into the pictures, connecting easily with their own life experiences and enjoyments.164 Most significantly,

162 Lillian “ She looks happy, so happy, she’s amazed that things are so beautiful around her.” (D3)
163 Lillian “ She reminds me of my mum. She is happy and contented, though my mum didn’t smile like that, she had a hard life.”
164 Norah “This reminds me of Cornwall.” (E11)
Lillian made an association with creation and age and saw renewal in old landscapes. Her personal response to (9), the new tree growing from an old trunk was poetic and hopeful of age in general, to the point of renewal and resurrection.

Wow, this one shows nature and how God creates. That’s gorgeous, you feel that something that is dead has come back to life again. It speaks volumes. It shows I can grow. Even though God says something is dead, something beautiful can grow out of it, its not dead.

Her words, for me, reached towards the transcendent.

2. Maureen placed herself in the landscapes that attracted her. Her seat in the peaceful woodlands with rabbits running by, or at the base of a hill, spoke of the beauty of the ordinary yet extraordinary; as did Norah’s twisted trees like wrung out washing, and Lillian’s stones like babies’ feet. The sheer poetry of their responses was striking.

3. Norah had a less positive response to one of the more ancient landscapes, (E7) mirroring her ambivalence toward the ageing portraits. “That’s a scary one, it looks like the rocks are going to disintegrate and drop you all over the floor.” Her fear of imminent fragmentation and collapse of the landscape is a cultural response to ageing already detected in social analysis.

4. Yet Norah’s favourite was another ancient landscape (E10), attracting her by its wholeness and connection with God.

I’m not over religious but this one looks like everything God has created, and God is looking over it all, the tree there, the mountain there, the waterfall. The whole lot is lovely.

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165 Lillian “I love walking in the wood.” (E3)

Maureen “I could sit in the woods on a lovely big seat, with all the rabbits running round (E3)… I could imagine someone up there playing the bagpipes and I could be sitting down there.” (E2)

Norah “Is that a tree trunk? It’s impressive. It looks like when you wring your clothes out by hand.” (E15)

Lillian “There are square stones on a beach in Wales and I found one that looked just like a baby’s foot.” (E18)
She had given herself a new perspective and placed herself to look through God’s eyes.

5. Peggy’s responses to both portraits and landscapes were challenging. Although troubled with arthritis she had enjoyed clay modelling and been very responsive, but found it hard to talk about the pictures because she could not choose. She found the subjectivity of the exercise restricting, which is both a fair comment on my methodology and an honest expression of the ineffable nature of beauty.

The conversation flowed into other landscapes in their experience which could all be considered sacred spaces, leading me to feel that listening to older people, participating alongside them, was to enter a very particular, and as yet mainly undiscovered, beautiful sacred space of their own. On the whole, although most of the group placed themselves within the pictures, and Lillian wove hope into her perceptions, they did not connect themselves aesthetically with their wide ranging and poetic descriptions of beauty. Seeing beauty through their eyes begged again the question, could older people themselves be described as portraying the wholeness of creation, the inspirers of memory and experience, as peaceful springs or as possibilities of renewal and recreation, all images of God? I am beginning to think so.
Group 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audrey</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>grandma, widow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beryl</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>grandma and great grandma, widowed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maurice</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>granddad and great granddad, widower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>grandma, widow</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Similar to previous groups, the request to make a clay model of their own faces was met with surprise and hilarity, and everyone tackled it. There was more concentrated quiet during the actual modelling, especially from Beryl and Chris, but where conversation flowed it was focussed, again falling into distinct patterns.

1. Self-awareness. Audrey immediately commented that “…we shan’t be putting in any wrinkles!” and that when she went for her spectacles she was told that she had a square jaw when she thought it was oval, so she must remember that as she is modelling. Audrey also put in her crow’s feet and smile. Maurice commented that he doesn’t smile, as he is a grumpy old man, that he had ignored his ears as they are too fiddly, and he has no hair anyway. He said that he had concentrated on his nose because it is “…outstanding, my face has gone very thin because I have been ill.” Audrey countered with “…your ears carry on growing till you’re ninety.”

2. Reminiscence. Maurice remembered 1940’s American film actress Myrna Loy who was “…really gorgeous, but when she played as an old lady, hadn’t she got a big nose, because her face went so thin.”

3. Awareness of each other. Audrey commented that Chris had rosy cheeks and Maurice said that Audrey’s image was “…good.”

4. Comments on the finished models. A discussion ensued about eyes being the most important feature. Maurice was reminded of his wife’s eyes and Audrey
found with delight that she had modelled a likeness of her late husband.

“That’s my Henry…we were always together.” Beryl stayed in the present having concentrated on specific features “…my chin with a dimple in it, and my nose, which turns up a bit.”

Comment.

As the oldest group, reminiscence threaded powerfully through the conversation during modelling. Although there were cultural perceptions, such as whether wrinkles should be added or not, the most powerful connection was with lost loved ones. Their words evoked the presence of husbands and wives, coming alive under their hands and through their stories. For Maurice, face and appearance directly linked to suffering love and mutual support. His story of his young wife’s illness was moving in its simplicity and intimacy.

The eyes are the most important feature. When my wife was ill her face went thin and very haggard and I found it very hard to look at her. Her appearance was very important to her so I would try and hide my own shock at its change. Yet when she woke in the morning she had bright blue eyes and I could look at her then.

The awareness of the participants’ own appearances was tinged with good-humoured self-deprecation, and a wise acceptance of visible ageing processes, like the growth of ears. Yet when talking about feeling in the image of God there was a wide range of response, from Audrey’s child-like openness to the possibility,166 Maurice’s thoughtful awareness of his own relationship with God,167 to Beryl’s deep feeling of unworthiness connected directly to feeling unbeautiful, “…beauty shines from within and I’m not good enough.” Here revealed is the kaleidoscopic spirituality of older

166 “Well now then, I’ve thought about that with my children, but I’ve never thought about it in myself.”
167 “We create the image of God as we want to see it… I like to think of him as my father.”
people reflected in the sheer variety of their unique life journeys, which belies the expectations of contemporary Christian culture

2. Portraits.

Responses.

1. Again, there was imaginative engagement through their relating to different expressions and telling stories about them. For Beryl (D5) “…has lots of stories to tell,” with Maurice adding “…he looks satisfied with his life, I’ve done what I’ve done and I don’t regret it.”

2. There was a complexity of racial awareness, with reactions to (D4) ranging from positive personal, through negativity and suspicion, to iconic connections.¹⁶⁸

3. Maurice’s perception of an oriental face (D14) with symmetrical features and implacable expression, “…she is a classical beauty,” connected with the graeco-roman.

4. Audrey connected the picture of Mary (D17) and (D19), saying “…they are both watchful, with a loving interest,” her perception of beauty embracing the transcendent.

5. These, the oldest participants, were the most positive so far in their perceptions of age. The older faces were described as still beautiful, kind, wise,¹⁶⁹ complex, peaceful, interesting with lots of stories to tell, real, accomplished, satisfied, happy, challenging.¹⁷⁰ Wrinkles were found to be attractive and

¹⁶⁸ “He looks kind, like there is a real empathy.”… “I don’t like him.”… “He has the same look as, oh you know, the one who was in prison all that time…Nelson Mandela.”
¹⁶⁹ Chris’s favourite “I liked the wisdom.” (D2)
¹⁷⁰ Audrey’s favourite. “He is the image of what I consider a real man. The kindness and concern but with an edge.” (D18)
associated with smiling. Imperfections were perceived as part of beauty.\textsuperscript{171} There was no negative commentary on ageing. Beryl, who had been the least likely to see beauty in her own image, was the only one who chose a child as her favourite picture, because “…she is full of mischief”

3. Landscapes.

Responses.

1. All participants were attracted to the most ancient landscapes. Their responses to and descriptions of natural beauty were multi-sensory. Beauty was movement and reflection of water, the play of light, patterns made.\textsuperscript{172} Great vistas and intricate detail were embraced.

2. Reminiscence wove through response, with memories shared of walking in mountains and fighting in the desert in the Second World War.

3. For Beryl, beauty correlated with the way it engaged her; the iris (E8) was “…pretty to look at but it doesn’t say anything to me.” She was most attracted to ancient landscape (E15). “This one makes me feel open, I think it’s the perspective, the horizon, the nearness and the farness.”

4. Transcendent and immanent qualities of beauty were touched upon by Chris in ancient landscape (E17).

I like anything with trees, the shapes they make. I love watching the trees as I walk up and down the hill, trees for me are God’s spirit.

5. Mountains humbled Maurice and Audrey found the most beauty in the near invisible, the magnified minutiæ of lichen on ancient rock.\textsuperscript{173}

\textsuperscript{171} Maurice’s favourite. “I like all the wrinkles round her eyes, she smiles a lot and I like her crooked teeth.” (D3)
\textsuperscript{172} Audrey “It’s amazing how that rock picks up the light.”(E12)
Maurice “I like the movement of water in this one.” (E10)
\textsuperscript{173} Maurice “Any scenery with mountains makes you feel small and humble.” (E1)
I wondered again why their dynamic descriptions of beauty in natural form, its light and movement, reflection, depth of meaning, perspective, intricacy of detail, its horizon’s ability to ‘open you up’, its imaging of God, are not being used to describe the beauty of older people in their natural form. For, as Chris pointed out, “…trees in winter are just as beautiful as trees in summer.”

Again I was left with feeling I had entered a sacred space by sharing their precious memories and profound perspectives.

Audrey  “I like the growth in this one, you can see all kinds of images in the rocks.” (E6)
Group 4. (Joan’s living room)

Joan 86, grandma, great widow  
Mary 86, grandma, widow  
Jackie 69, single


There was much talk beforehand, but after explaining the task, the quiet of concentration descended. Joan was suffering with arthritis in her wrists, finding it hard to mould the clay, but struggled on. There was a general murmur of laughter and:

1. Self-awareness. There was much comment about their dubious ability to mould the clay, and an expressed awareness of distance between creator and creature from Jackie. “God might have been creator but he didn’t give me any arts and crafts!” They worried about whether they were doing it right, with much self-deprecating humour about their efforts.①

2. Awareness of each other. Mutual support was definite and emphatic as they deferred to each other with “…that’s good…that’s good…that’s very good”

3. Comments about the finished models. Mary pointed out her imperfections. “I look like a toothless wonder…I have a lumpy nose” while Joan considered how her face had changed. “I did have a nice mouth, but it’s gone now.”

During the break, the conversation became reminiscent, with shared experiences of growing up, learning and giving strength, being brought up as children to be seen and not heard.

Comment.

① Jackie “It looks more like a flippin’ ape or a prehistoric man.”  
Joan “It’s supposed to be me and it looks like a man!”  
Mary “I should have brought my granddaughter and say ‘here, you do it.’”
This group really concentrated on the task in hand, reminiscing came later. Theirs’ was a wholly practical response with many comments on the process of modelling, indeed, any self-deprecation was balanced by Mary’s view that they had done a good job considering. Their use of the word “good” in reference to their work could be heard as creation language, but also possibly learnt from their traditional education experiences. By finding the ‘good’ in each other’s images, they revealed themselves to be a mutually supportive group, and the laughter and gentle teasing reflected this. Culturally the group’s responses reflected the norm in their comments on their ageing faces. Anything nice about Joan’s mouth had “gone” and Mary’s was a “toothless wonder”, reinforcing the society’s view of old women as crones. However, no one mentioned wrinkles.

Regarding self-perception as made in God’s image, Mary could not make the link for herself. Joan connected her own peacefulness and contentment with God. Her choice of words, “…the important things are there” suggest a holistic spirituality to be strived for. Jackie considered the question intellectually and concluded that she could not authentically say whether she was in the image of God or not. Overall the group’s responses again emphasised the variety and profundity of older people’s spirituality, despite culture’s homogenising power.

2. Portraits.

Responses.

1. Again, the group responded by giving the portraits stories. Of (D5) Jackie stated “…he’s not happy with what’s happened” while for Joan “…he looks as if he has a tale to tell.”

175 Mary “For old ladies’ fingers we’ve done very well.”
2. The pictures of young and classically beautiful adults were commented upon negatively as lacking vitality, dissatisfied or hard to read.\textsuperscript{176}

3. The participants found both pictures of children attractive, innocence and character being equally important to them. Again, (D6) had cultural resonance, triggering thoughts about Madeleine Mcann and her perceived lost innocence through suffering. Jackie chose (D9) as her favourite as he reminded her of her nephew.

4. (D17) inspired responses revealing the different ways religious experience had influenced the group’s perceptions. Mary was “peace”, “love” and also classically beautiful, “…she looks like a statue I’ve seen somewhere.”

5. The participants had much to say about ageing, positively and negatively. The attractiveness of age was to be found in wisdom and experience\textsuperscript{177}, the ability to love and be loved.\textsuperscript{178} Less attractive qualities of age were the sense of hopelessness, loss and pain.\textsuperscript{179} Mary’s reasoning for her favourite picture (D2) connected the happier connotations of old age with the painful to reveal fortitude as an attractive attribute. “She reflects, she’s had a happy life and taken all that’s been thrown at her in good part.” Mary said that (D2) “reflects” and described (D3) as “shining” with happiness, tentatively connecting the human portrait with a more visual and landscape understanding of beauty and suggesting the possibility of powerful visibility.

\textsuperscript{176} Joan “There’s no life in that face.” (D1)
Mary “She doesn’t look pleased with life.” (D11)
Jackie “You don’t quite know what they’re doing.” (D15)
\textsuperscript{177}Jackie “The old lady has wisdom because she has lived life.” (D2)
\textsuperscript{178}Joan’s favourite “She’s lovely and she’ll be lovely inside. You could give her a big hug and a kiss if you didn’t know her.” (D2)
\textsuperscript{179}Jackie “There is pain and suffering as I get older, there is not much in it for me now.” (D10), yet Joan responds with “…but I bet she was there for everybody.”
6. Joan and Jackie talked in terms of ageing as a process. In her response to (D12) “...nothing hurts at this stage” and to an older portrait (D2) who has “...got the look of experience and suffering,” Jackie described life in terms of linear stages, with pain coming with the years. Joan referred to (D8) as a face that has “become”, offering a counter cultural impression of faces maturing, improving and softening with story. The correlation of age and growth was a hopeful one. Overall, the group’s responses towards the older faces was positive, and culturally transcendent, even if they did not connect this beauty with their own.

3. Landscapes.

Responses.

1. All three women had different responses to the beauty of landscape, yet all engaged profoundly, and poetically, shedding lights on the possibility of using landscape forms to describe the forms of older people.

Mary was attracted to forms close-up. The flower and the stonewall inspired her description of the creative relationship between God and humanity.

Now that is the magic of nature. I often look at flowers and think they’ve had man’s help but there’s got to be a creator. (E8)... this puts me in mind with what man can do with what God’s created.

Although, when modelling clay, Mary had not connected herself with the image of God, here she is doing so, profoundly; thus revealing another facet of an older person’s spirituality, that continuous and dynamic creative

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180 Joan “She has grown, her face has become, she used to look really hard. I could never see anything in this lady’s face.” (D8)
181 Joan “…this is just waking up to spring.” (E3) “…that’s lovely, that’s dawn.” (E5)
Mary “…it’s the calm before the storm.” (E1)
relationship with God. Similarly, Joan responded to (E10) by wanting to paint it.

2. For Jackie, collecting together certain landscapes, enabled her to express the diversity and interconnectedness of creation, along with constantly changing perspectives provided by the mood of the viewer. “(E1), (E7), (E10), (E14) and (E16) gives you the vastness of creation in different forms and depending on different moods.” She chose as her favourite (E10) “…because it embodies the whole, there’s fire, where the sun catches, water and storm above.” Her emphasis on beauty as the whole of creation made me wonder, regarding older people, if society were to look with Jackie’s eyes, in the widening of horizons, would we perhaps get some sense of the whole? Instead of turning away from ageing forms in fear of meaninglessness and loss, if we turned towards them, how much would we see?

3. Joan was attracted to less obvious landscapes and boundary places - under the sea, dawn breaking, and wasted trees in the desert. For her the most beautiful was landscape (E17) which “…makes you think of age…it goes on and on, it’s old but always there, like the world, well life.” What a fascinating idea, that old is beautiful because it is simply itself. The idea of length and continuity, is a challenge to our culture of constant overhaul and necessity of new, where old has come to mean the end of things, rather than offering a sense of continuing life and future.

4. Mary, in a mixture of pragmatism and hope, found meaning in (E9) “…this shows me how bleak things can be, yet in a few months it will be thriving.”

I was struck again by the spiritual agility of the participants, as they embraced the profound among the sandwiches.
Control Group: a comparative analysis

Rachel 29, married
Richard 29, married (to Rachel)
Tom 29, married
Karen 28, married (to Tom), mother
John 36, single

1. Clay

The group had already started to model the clay before any instructions were given.

When asked to model their own faces they were quiet and thoughtful, as opposed to the general surprise and laughter of the older groups.

After the initial quietness of concentration, there was much animated conversation and similar patterns.

1. Self-awareness. Karen described herself as “…three standard deviations from the norm,” and wanted “…to draw symbols of things in my head rather than my head.” Tom wanted to make a mask of his own face. There was discussion about whether they saw themselves in glasses, about the cost of moisturizer, and general dialogue about what they had been doing.

2. Awareness of each other. The participants’ comments on each other’s models ranged from supportive\textsuperscript{182}, teasing,\textsuperscript{183} to Tom’s ironic comment on the lack of detail on Karen’s, “…you are a bit expressionless, I would say.”

3. Comments on the finished models. John emphasised his “…thick eyebrows and prominent features”, Tom’s showed his “…attention to detail and realism, I’ve even got the scar above my left eye.” Richard also went for detail, “I’ve not left anything out.” Whereas Rachel left off her glasses and Karen did not put in any detail at all.

\textsuperscript{182} Rachel to John “Yours looks Picassoesqe.”
\textsuperscript{183} Rachel to Richard “Yours looks like the Big Friendly Giant and your hair looks like Tin Tin.”
Mine has no face…I don’t view my face as changing, I don’t notice it changing, and we live in a world of hair straighteners, and my hair doesn’t change.

Comment.

The complexity of self-awareness combined with commentary on the task, and their teasing of each other, revealed the closeness of the group. Their humour was intelligent, ironic and engaged. Not, as in previous groups, self-deprecating but self-defining or self-inclusive. Karen’s “no face” was not symbolic of self-effacement, but rather a strong and unique sense of self. Their confidence with the medium reflected youthful dexterity. Richard was particularly eloquent in his expression of how he used the clay to make a three dimensional image. Each clay head was boldly represented with much detail, paralleling the boldness and definition of their dialogue and sense of self.

The group displayed a wide-ranging cultural awareness from the start, including travel, internet, popular music, celebrities, television, children’s literature, and art. They were as flexible with their language as they were with their hands, creating words – “Picassoesque”; using shorthand; handling difficult concepts lightly. Their off-subject conversation remained firmly in the present, dynamic and practical. There was some reminiscence from the oldest member of the group, but much more about practical forward planning. A very analytical group, there was a freedom to open up and dialogue their thoughts and through the clay forms they explained themselves to one another.

184 Richard “I wanted to get the relief of the face, because it’s clay I wanted it 3D.”
When discussing whether they saw themselves as images of God, Rachel highlighted the feminist problem of relating to God as male, challenging and/or complementing Richard’s confidence in seeing himself, in his humanity, as God’s image.\textsuperscript{185}

Tom widened this confidence by aesthetically connecting God’s image and humanity as a whole, “…it’s not the same as myself, but there is the principle of God as beautiful and people as beautiful.” Both Rachel and Karen connected Christian discipleship and behaviour, while John’s interpretation of image revealed a burgeoning older spirituality and defined a maturation process.

Maybe as I get older it’s more inward than outward. There are no details of what Adam and Eve look like so we superimpose youth onto them.

Here John touches on the paradox of a beauty that blossoms internally but will stay hidden while youth remains the image of God.

2. Portraits

Responses.

1. The participants immediately responded with cultural indicators. Each well-known portrait was identified, engaged with and critiqued before anonymous faces were perused. The instant and unanimous cultural categorisation was unique to this group. Also many of the other faces were linked with more famous ones. Karen immediately spotted Sheila Hancock, and saw “…the dove advert” (D19) before she saw the face. Rachel thought (D1) looked like “Cathy from Friends…” Tom thought (D20) had “…a bit of a Gordon Brown look” and (D11) was “…almost Dianaesque.”

\textsuperscript{185} Richard “I would imagine God to be human, the image of God as human.”

Rachel “I don’t think its something I ever think about. It’s always behaviour. I never think about it as an image, and as a female, I don’t think of God as female so that makes it harder.”
2. They were confident in their critique of beauty. This was a judging competition; based on the pictures’ aesthetic appeal and the way they made them feel. Their personal choice was taken as read. They brought themselves into the process, with as many “I’s” and “Me’s” as there were “she’s” and “he’s” whereas the older participants tended to lose themselves in the portraits and tell their stories.

3. The conversations were analytical and, by their own admission, cynical. Karen critiqued the madness of choice in the beauty industry, when being made up for her wedding she was “…offered five different colours of foundation for the natural look” and there was a general agreement that the beauty industry targets more women than men.

4. Photographic techniques were analysed, with comments about faces looking “fake” (D12) or “posed” (D10), (D12). A conversation on airbrushing ensued.

5. There was analysis of culture’s prevailing attitudes towards ageing from a younger perspective. In response to (D4) Richard stated “…we are much more tolerant of ageing men, we like them better than older women,” and of (D11) John asked “…do we find her attractive because that’s western beauty?”

6. Regarding older faces, the participants connected frailty with pity. Tom responded to (D10) “…I feel sorry for her, she is very frail.” Great age was also a cause for wonder. Richard thought that (D10) “…looks very, very old.” The older portraits were also categorised, being divided between those who

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186 Karen “I like her” (D2)
Rachel “She irritates me…she is not classy enough” (D1)
187 Race was not an issue for this group.
had “aged well”\textsuperscript{188} and those who had not. “She doesn’t seem alive,” said John of (D10). Age and death were consciously linked for the first time.

7. Rachel asked of the portraits as a whole “…why is there only one fit man?” referring to (D15). The older participants had not asked this question. Their views of beauty had been more wide-ranging. Except, ironically, for portrait (D15), where the dark glasses had been looked upon with suspicion in every older group.

8. When deciding on favourites, Karen, was the only one to choose older faces, “(D2) and (D19) because they both look like they have a sense of humour, they look like they get jokes, and if you get jokes you can get them forever.” Her reasoning highlights an important facet of older people’s spirituality, sense of humour, which, for Karen, shows on their faces. They have an embodied spirituality! Here is a younger person, all be it one who sees and understands in off-kilter, counter-cultural ways, who perceives this beauty in older people. This encourages me in my belief that such beauty is visible, just unnoticed by the majority.

9. The other participants chose younger faces as the most attractive. Rachel chose (D6) “…because she is cute and the cutest person I know at the moment is my niece, and she’s like that”. Tom chose (D9) “…the age of innocence and youth, and you’d stay that age forever if you could.” Older people who have chosen the boy have done so because its reminded them, like Rachel, of someone they are fond of, but Tom expressed the ‘forever young’ zeitgeist where our aesthetic sense is moulded around our fears of growing old. Both Richard and John picked classically beautiful (D11). None of the older groups

\textsuperscript{188} Rachel “…yes she’s old but she’s aged well” (D2)
had singled her out as attractive. Here youth mirrors youth. John also picked (D4) “…for his wisdom”, possibly showing that John is at a crossroads in his life with ageing and wisdom pointing in one direction, and the attractions of youth in another.

3. Landscapes.

Responses.

1. Compared to older groups, the participants’ initial responses to natural forms were cultural rather than emotional or experiential. Karen said of (E15) “…that’s cool, it looks like an album cover”, for Tom, “…it’s like a Salvador Dali.” Their responses combined subjective attraction - Rachel liked sunlight and snowdrops, mountains and clouds - and objective critique.

2. The ways the photographs were framed, or developed was important. (E10), although Karen wanted to go there, and Tom was inspired to get his walking boots on, on closer inspection, was judged by the whole group to be digitally manipulated. It was deconstructed and denounced as “unreal.” This was one of the images judged most attractive and powerful by the older groups.

3. Images were categorised and attractiveness defined by what they judged as “amazing” well made, and “good…for purely aesthetic value” - Richard’s judgement of landscape (E5) - as opposed to “safe” “stock” and “fake”.  

189 Rachel “…that’s amazing isn’t it” (E18)
190 Tom “There’s a lot of sophisticated engineering work here.” (E12)
191 Tom “…that’s a safe local image”(E3) whereas for the older groups this image inspired poetic imagination.
192 Rachel “…the desert looks fake to me” Richard “it looks like a stock image” (E14) the image which took Maurice back to World War II
4. For Karen, having already revealed a counter-attraction to ‘old’, the two landscapes most attractive to her were so because of characteristics that can be translated directly into longevity. Firstly landscape (E9)

…because it ain’t going anywhere, its seen a lot and it ain’t budging. I like its kind of resoluteness, it looks like its survived some storms.

Then (E17) “…because you never get bored of it, because it has light and shade and texture and everything.” The wholeness, strength and multi-layered nature of ancient landscapes add to a growing aesthetic code that could flesh out the forms of older people as beautiful.

5. On the whole the participants were less cynical when considering the beauty of nature. There was more evidence of the importance of story and experience already revealed in the older groups. Richard chose (E16) because

…it’s a picture of something. Unless you were there in the landscape, pictures just wash over me. Because it’s a millstone then its got a story or a history behind it.

His words suggest the importance of a sense of place and story in this growing aesthetic code.

6. There is a connection between God and nature, creator and creation. John likes (E7) “…because it’s a mountain, I associate it with people going up to pray” and (E11) where “…there is a sense of communication with God.”

Tom’s breadth of aesthetic appreciation felt numinous.

I can’t get enough of them, there is so much detail and beauty. Some are distant beauty and some are detail and it shows that everywhere you look you can see the beauty of God’s creation. You can see God’s hand even in the engineering.

This appreciation of creation is a connecting factor between older and younger groups where beauty is concerned.
7. Rachel’s connection of a landscape with a human form “…the desert to me looks like the woman you chose, stereotypical beauty”, although in the context of youthful beauty, is an encouraging way forward into new perceptions of older people. The group’s openness to creation and ability to perceive human form in terms of landscape, gives me hope for a way of perceiving older people which is deeper than our classically fed Western roots, yet accessible to all, regardless of age.
Conclusion.

As participant observer in the four groups of older people, having interacted with them, listened to their descriptions of beauty, and tentatively seen through their eyes, I am encouraged by the emerging possibilities of re-imaging older people as embodied beauty. Just as they were attracted to the beauty of the smiling older person, I was attracted to the humour in which they viewed themselves and the fun they had with the clay. Also, as they were drawn empathically to each other, and to the experiences of some of the portraits and the hope in dying landscapes, I too was attracted to their particular suffering stories. I found their sense of mutual support expressed in the sharing of those stories, in their reminiscing and unique ability to enter into another’s story particularly attractive and realised the privilege of entering into a beautiful community, or community of the beautiful. Lastly, their positive poetic descriptions of place, the groundedness of their spirituality, opened up for me the possibility of a whole new set of symbols to theologically reflect upon, and thus offer as a way of perceiving older people, counter to accepted aesthetic codes, as a visible and beautifully unique part of the Body of Christ. A dialectical openness to creation, and a direct connection between human form and landscape expressed in the younger group also gave me hope that any new perspectives will be visible to and engageable with every generation.

In the light of my research I aim to reflect on these four surfacing particularities of age – humour, suffering, community and place, searching out, for each piece, theologians whose thinking resonates with and illuminates the particular experiences of older people, thus giving form to the newly discovered content. To aid the visible and
contextual expression of this form, I have interwoven four corresponding portraits of older people by American artist Judy Somerville.\textsuperscript{193}

\textsuperscript{193} At the time of submission, an exhibition offshoot of Newcastle University’s ‘Changing Age’ Campaign at the Great North Museum also interfaces art and ageing (together with science). The show’s curator, Lucy Jenkins reflects this thesis. “The way things are going now, the vast majority of us are going to live to a ripe old age and if there has come to come a point when you look in the mirror and you don’t like what you see that’s very undermining for your self-esteem and the quality of your life. That is why art, which can reach in to people and get them to think and respond differently, is so important” (Jenkins in Brown, 2011, 23)
Beauty that casts a shadow: resulting reflections.
The Threat of the Smile: humour in old age.

The face is the place of the smile, where the message of love is read, we perceive the world with its smiles and its threats, not in the abstract, but in faces with expressions in them. (Tournier, 1968, 27)

They look like they get jokes, and if you get jokes you can get them forever. (Karen, Group 5)

My overall impression of the groups of older participants was that of good humour, mirth and amusement. If my results had a face, it would be one that began with a twinkle of the eye, turned on a smile and dissolved beautifully into laughter, as anticipated in American artist Judy Somerville’s “The Not So Old Man”. This picture
provides a visual catalyst for my arguments regarding the transformative nature of older people and laughter, and, aesthetically, joyfully, its artist celebrates the transformative nature of older people *per se*.

As generation after generation of elderly[sic] remain “unseen” and younness becomes the mode; I say let’s change this image. Let’s forget the calendar girls and bring on the elderly[sic] as images of old people suddenly appear over every mantle place in America. (Somerville, 2008,1)

It was my methodological intention to encourage an atmosphere of playfulness and joyfulness throughout the research, and, just as the colours of the ‘not so old man’s face, coat and hat match that of his surroundings, none of the older people involved found themselves in an alien environment. Often, perceptions of beauty and happiness coalesced, with the smiling portraits proving most attractive overall. Moreover, the groups themselves provided a happy time. The good humour with which the tasks were approached; the joking, intimate nature of their mutual support; the laughter in which they lost themselves as they became more creatively expressive, repeatedly ‘faced off’ the cultural caricature of ageing as joyless, fearful and constricting. Indeed, age as an expression of joy beautifully challenges the tightly pursed lips of western civilisation, which has a deeply troubled relationship with laughter. There is, I aim to argue with a newly learnt twinkle in my own eye, a threat in an older person’s smile.
The threat of laughter: a Western pathology.

In Somerville’s picture, the ‘not so old’ man stares out from behind black-rimmed spectacles. The corners of his mouth rise as his eyes narrow. The smile, precedes, perhaps, the laugh, but what will be revealed through the opening of that dark and toothless cavern? In “Laughter, A theological essay”, one of the theological and philosophical portraits from which I draw my thoughts, Kuschel emphasises the unruly nature of laughter as a concept in western thought.

…a phenomenology of laughter is like dancing on a volcano. Hardly do you feel you are on safe ground than it breaks away… No scientific theory and no church power has ever really been able to categorise or even control laughter (Kuschel, 1994, xi)

He draws directly from early twentieth century French philosopher Henri Bergson who writes of laughter:

The greatest of thinkers, from Aristotle downwards, have tackled this little problem, which has a knack of baffling every effort, of slipping away, only to bob up again, a pert challenge at philosophical speculation (Bergson, 1911, 1)

Indeed, in the spirit of unruly laughter itself, one only needs to draw a broad brush-stroke through the phenomenological history of laughter to find social and religious aesthetic codes just waiting to be broken by envisioning an older person laughing.

According to Kuschel, paralleling already drawn lines of aesthetic thought, the roots of our thinking on laughter and joy can be traced back to Hellenistic culture. In Homer’s Iliad a dangerous mood among the gods is diffused by their laughter at what they perceive to be comical in the appearance and actions of limping Hephaistos, god of the smithy

... among the blessed immortals uncontrollable laughter went up as they saw Hephaistos bustling about the palace. Thus thereafter the whole day long until the sun went under they feasted, nor was anyone’s hunger denied a fair portion.

(Homer, 1951, Book I 599-604)
Here is the poetic beginning of caricature and aesthetic marginalisation of imperfection, which resonates in contemporary ‘classical’ culture. The Homeric laughter of the gods is “…an expression of their eternal youth and power, their lack of concern and their heedlessness…on Olympus the atmosphere seems to have been rather like that of today in many male locker rooms” (Kuschel, 1994, 2, 6)\(^{194}\)

For the mortal realm, classical philosophy narrowed and marginalised the concept of laughter itself. Plato remained resolutely straight-faced and “…condemned all unbridled laughter, arguing that excess should be avoided in both joy and pain and that dignity should be preserved by the observation of the right mean.” (ibid 11)\(^ {195}\) A wise person should know the nature of laughter in order to avoid it.

> It is necessary also to consider and know uncomely persons and thoughts, and those which are intended to produce laughter in comedy…For serious things cannot be understood without laughable things…for this very reason he should learn them both, in order that he may not in ignorance do or say anything which is ridiculous or out of place. (Plato, 360 BCEa, Book VII)

In Plato’s Philebus, which dichotomises pleasure and wisdom, humour is again considered inferior.

> Philebus was saying that enjoyment and pleasure and delight…are a good to every living being whereas I contend, that not these but wisdom, intelligence and memory and their kindred, right opinion and true reason, are better and more desirable than pleasure. (Plato, 360 BCEb)

For him the laughable is that which does not know itself. “Plato has Socrates advance the view that we laugh at the foolish conceit of those who think themselves wealthier,

\[^{194}\] Stephen Moore encapsulates the echoing and re-echoing resonance of classical divinity and contemporary cultural locker room aesthetic in the image of body-building.

> “…the overall impression, finally, should be one of absolute symmetry, no one muscle group overpowering any other, but all combining to overpower the spectator instead” (Moore, 1996, 79)

\[^{195}\] Plato’s Laws, 732c, 735.
more handsome, but especially wiser than in fact they are…” (Gutwirth, 1993, 52) To laugh is both to put oneself above the inferior and also to be relieved that one is superior, but at the risk of rendering oneself undignified, unethical - and therefore inferior. From his elevated philosophical standpoint, laughter was a trap Plato had no desire to fall into. Laughter was immoderate, and therefore to be condemned. Aristotle, ironically, was more moderate in his thinking about laughter, arguing that the comic could be tamed, for rhetorical and entertainment purposes, into a sense of the ridiculous.

For comedy aims at representing men as worse…not however in the full sense of the word, bad, the ludicrous being merely a subdivision of ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive. (Aristotle, 350BCE, II, V)

If, in the words of the Muses at Thebes, that which is beautiful is loved, then for Aristotle, that which is ugly is laughable, ridiculous, and not harmful.

Aristotle may have disempowered laughter, yet the threat of the smile, the fear of untamed laughter, was retained in western thought. It can be seen reflected “…in a line of tradition…from John Chrysostom, through Augustine to Bernard of Clairvaux and Hugo of St Victor, of the Christian denunciation of laughter.” (Kuschel, 1994, 43)

Laughter, already inferior for being that which does not know itself, becomes, that which does not know God. For Chrysostom, immoderate laughter points away from eternal life.

If thou also weep thus, thou art become a follower of thy Lord. Yea for he also wept, both over Lazarus and over the city…but nowhere laugh nay nor smile but a little…Christ discourses to us much of mourning, and blesses them that mourn, and pronounces them that laugh wretched. For this is not the theatre of laughter, neither did we come together that we may give way to immoderate mirth, but that we may groan, and by this groaning inherit a kingdom. (Chrysostom, 347-407a, Homily VI, 283-292)
Chrysostom’s “…identification of laughter and vanity, laughter and forgetfulness of sins, indeed laughter and remoteness from God…has a powerful effect in history.” (Kuschel, 1994, 48) This theology of tears soaked its way through intellectual changes of further centuries. During the Enlightenment, Hobbes in “…the ringing formulation of the most widespread and most influential of the psychological explanations…tied laughter…indisputably to our self-love” (Gutwirth, 1993, 59) by stating that laughter proceeds from a “…Sudden glory…caused either by some sudden act of their own that pleaseth them, or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.” (Hobbes, 1651, Ch V1, 33) Spinoza inverts Chrysostom and sees laughter as a way to become closer to the divine, but paradoxically, there is still the intimation that laughter is also the way to chaos.

Laughter, as also jocularity, is merely pleasure; therefore so long as it be not excessive, it is in itself good. Assuredly nothing forbids man[sic] to enjoy himself save grim and gloomy superstition…the greater pleasure wherewith we are affected, the greater perfection where too we pass, in other words, the more we must necessarily partake of the Divine Nature. Therefore to make use of what comes our way, and to enjoy it as much as possible (not to the point of satiety for that would not be enjoyment) is part of a wise man[sic]. (Spinoza, 1677, Prop. XLV)

Laughter’s unruly nature remained something to be feared, or looked down upon, rather than delighted in, until the last century, when, Bergson, in his essay on the comic, embraced its uncontrollability as an integral part of his radical dynamic philosophy.196

196 “Bertrand Russell (who published an article entitled “The Philosophy in Bergson” in the Monist in 1912) …notes that any attempt at clarifying Bergson will fail, as his philosophy cuts across all divisions, whether empiricist, realist or idealist.” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2009, 3)
Meanwhile, Western theology remained firmly encamped in its vale of tears. Jürgen Moltmann, in a critique of “…life’s reformations and revolutions”, states that

The Puritans used to tell their children ‘You haven’t come into the world for pleasure’…The Reformation fought justification by works in the medieval ecclesiastical society with its system of penances, indulgences and almsgiving on the grounds of a new faith which justified without the works of the law…The reformation also abolished the holidays, games and safety valves of that society. This led to the establishment of the Puritan society of penny pinchers and to the industrial workaday world among the very people who had at first insisted on believing that men[sic] were justified by faith alone.” (Moltmann, 1971, 35)

Moltmann argues, prophetically, that the protestant work ethic will endure long after Protestantism has lost its power and meaning, as work is the religion of the capitalist society. Laughter may no longer be conceptually perceived as serious error, but, even with Bergsonian delight in the chaos of comedy in the philosophical background, it can still labour under the strict mastery of classical and ecclesial canons.197

Extrapolated to lifestyle, relaxation, playfulness, joyfulness, and light-heartedness still serves the ‘greater good’ of work and productivity, “…the purpose of relaxation is to restore a person’s fitness for coming demands.” (ibid, 33)

So what of an older person smiling, laughing, being joyful? Does the cavern open to reveal a limping Hephaistos, having downed his tools, forever platonically undignified, ridiculous; a caricature, the decay of tooth denoting the material and the lack of work denoting the inferior, therefore to be laughed at rather than laughed with? Does the sight of an older person’s face dissolving into laughter contribute to the socially accepted image of age as increasingly invisible? Does the sound of laughter

197 In his introduction to the exhibition “Jesus: Laughing and Loving” Richard Frazer (minister, Greyfriars, Tolbooth and Highland Kirk, Edinburgh, remarks… “At its best laughter is subversive enough to enable the truth to be told…it is hard to keep control over people who laugh too much. The Christian Church has certainly been a controlling influence.” (Edinburgh Fringe Festival, 2004, 2)
ring hollow, or is there some threat in the smile? Can the inferior somehow laugh at the powerful? Could it be possible that age has the ‘last laugh’?
The freedom of laughter: a theological reflection.

1. The widening smile.

...laughter knows no limits, no tabu, no respect and there is much laughter at the loftiest things as the lowliest, as much laughter at the holiest as at the most banal. Thus laughter embraces the whole spectrum of life and morality; from goodness to meanness, from humanity to barbarism. The spirit of laughter seems in principle to be the spirit of freedom, the lack of concern which reacts to distortions of reality. (Kuschel, 1994, xvii)

In his reflection on laughter, through the discovery of the spirit of freedom within it, Kuschel goes some way to release the power of laughter from the constraints of classicism. His alignment of laughter with freedom holds more positivity and less fear than the platonic alignment with excess, and draws deeply from Bergson’s dynamic thoughts on the multiplicity and interconnection of all things. It is also an alignment that implies human transformation. However diffuse, laughter does not occur in a vacuum. Bergson states “…laughter is in need of an echo…our laughter is also the laughter of the group. (Bergson, 1911, 3) Laughter’s natural environment “…is society [its function is] …a social one” (ibid), a premise plunging laughing older people, even while being culture’s diaspora, right into the heart of community.

When this happens, laughter takes on deeper tonality. With older people, laughter is laughter of a group experiencing marginalisation and suffering. It is not simply a laughing ‘at’ implying distance or superiority, but a laughing ‘with’ and from ‘within’, implying connection and incarnation. The “not so old man” with his sporty cap is painted against a horizontally barred background which gives the impression of a sporting occasion and a sense of something about to be let loose. Horses or greyhounds perhaps, or teams with a ball. There is a spirit of freedom and play, which
the man in his matching colours seems both part of and separated from. Moltmann asks

…how can I play in a strange land?...in an alienated and alienating society? There is of course…a kind of laughter which bursts out in despair, we can laugh at others with scorn, and there is the snobbish smile or cynical grin. But jubilant, liberating laughter is always unburdening and burden free. But how can we laugh, how can we rejoice without care, when we are worried, depressed, tortured by the state of the world in which we live…Is there really such a thing as freedom in the midst of slavery, joy in the midst of suffering, and praising God in the groaning of his creatures? (Moltmann, 1971, 26, 27)

In the research groups I discovered that older people laugh and play as a way of supporting each other through life experiences which by their very nature of suffering and loss, threaten to exclude them from the interest and support of societies which value physical health, productivity and youth, and caricatures the perceived powerlessness of age. Octogenarian Anglican priest, Dr. Una Kroll agrees.

A sense of humour is a blessing to older people like myself for it helps us to live with the disabilities and diminishments of old age, the inevitable imprisonment of longevity…it helps us get through situations of frustration, stress and fear. (Kroll, 2007, 6)

The participants’ laughter, often directed at themselves, their self-caricaturing, especially when making their own faces with clay, could also be understood as self-empowerment rather than self-fulfilling prophecy.\(^{198}\) Bergson sees caricature as a highlighting of natural imperfection.

However regular we may imagine a face to be, however harmonious its lines and supple its movements, their adjustment is never altogether perfect. There will always be discoverable signs of some impending bias, the vague suggestion of a possible grimace, in short, some favourable distortion which nature seems to be particularly inclined. (Bergson, 1911,11)

\(^{198}\) Group 2: Norah “Mine is like a monster!”…Peggy “…it looks like a gargoyle in a church.”
In laughing freely at their own imperfections, older people display their broken chains in a world that imprisons beauty in unblemished symmetry.

From another perspective, Kroll compares the self-deprecating humour of older people with Jewish humour.

…it armoured them against insults which were always coming their way, and thus furnished them with an effective method of outward defence. This factor helps to explain why so much of the humour was directed against themselves. Jibes were certain to come anyway, so why not let them be self-inflicted? Thus jibes were not merely robbed of their sting, but actually made a source of perverse pleasure. They transformed the Jews from the victim of mockery to its master. (Browne in Kroll, 2007, 6)\(^\text{199}\)

Laughter empowers older people within their own communities, and beyond them. The sort of playfulness, born of marginalisation, can be translated into Moltmann’s dialectic, where “…playing [we are] neither master nor servant” (Moltmann, 1971, 46) but free to be ourselves. Moltmann’s theology of joy and his idea that “…laughter is able to mediate between the infinite magnitude of our tasks and the limitations of our strength” (ibid) enables me to see the playful joy of older people as not over-against the world in which they live, but rather as the potential to build up and transform society as a whole.

2. The eyes twinkle.

The participants’ laughter and joy arose amidst their stories of loss and suffering, with no denial of either. By reflecting on the liberating qualities of laughter within the serious realities of life, instead of seeing laughter as the opposite of seriousness, Bergson’s philosophy and Moltmann’s theology resonate with the reality of older people’s experience, thus giving those experiences value and visibility. Also, if, as

my research seeks to reveal, the smile of the older person is actually the expression of liberating laughter within life’s experiences, then Moltmann’s description of a playful creator God places them definitely and dynamically at the heart of God’s story.

How…can we explain God’s freedom relative to his creation? The world as free creation cannot be a necessary unfolding of God nor an emanation of his being from his divine fullness. God is free. But he does not act capriciously. When he creates something that is not God but also not nothing, then this must have its ground not in itself but in God’s ‘goodwill’ or ‘pleasure’. Hence the creation is God’s play, a play of his groundless and inscrutable wisdom. It is the realm in which God displays his glory…[Creation] did not have to be, but creation suits his deepest nature or else he would not enjoy it. This may be expressed symbolically in the categories of play. (ibid, 40 - 41)

One of the patterns emerging from group research, and flowing from the sheer joy of playing with clay, was the joy and pleasure taken from the pictures of children. Kroll echoes the delight expressed in the cheeky smile of youth and the descriptions of the loving relationships with their own and others’ grandchildren as she describes the “instant rapport” between very old and very young, and comments that “…playfulness is one of the fruits of old age.” (Kroll, 2007, 9) Just like children, older people have the ability to play, to take joy in simply being, and if playfulness, as Moltmann argues, is “…the realm in which God displays his glory” (Moltmann, 1971, 42) then older people are not only visible, but also beautiful as images of God.

…man’s[sic] playful rejoicing in his[sic] existence, his[sic] pure unforced pleasure in creative play and his[sic] fondness for expression and representation…has to be the human echo to the pleasure of God in his creation. The glorification of God lies in the demonstrative joy of existence…man’s[sic] uninhibited fondness for this finite life and by his affirmation of mortal beauty shares the infinite pleasure of the Creator. (ibid)

200 Group 1. Audrey: (D6)“The little boy, he’s got a lovely smile…the little girl, she is cute, like Maddie.”
Group 4. Mary: (D6)“…now that is innocence”
Jackie: (D9)“…he looks like he’s got a spirit of adventure…it’s the sort of picture that when you look at it, it makes you happy.”
Older people, as they play simply for the sheer joy of it, become visible, beautiful, and ontologically significant.

Anyone who lays hold of the joy which embraces the creator and his\[sic\] own existence also gets rid of the dreadful question of existence. For what?...he\[sic\] becomes immune...to a society which values and rewards men\[sic\] only in terms of their practical usefulness and their suitability as labour and consumers. \(\text{ibid}, 42\)

In playing and laughing, older people show us how to be. In finding their meaning simply by rejoicing in God’s and their own existence, older people are truly free, and in being free, become a model of liberation for all. Indeed, older people laughing embody the gospel model of liberation. Richard Frazer, says that the Edinburgh Fringe Festival Exhibition, “Jesus Laughing and Loving”

\[\ldots\text{exposes the degree to which western Christianity constrains the image of Jesus into very tightly confined categories and does not allow him to be fully human...In many ways we miss the earthy humour of his stories and the laughter that probably attended many of the episodes of his ministry (Frazer, 2004, 2)\]

Older people and Jesus, images of God, standing together on the holy ground of life and laughing and playing, present a model which ideally “…preserves and protects against the demonic, against despair, against man’s\[sic\] self-deification and self-vilification, against the mania of perfection and of despondency in the face of imperfection.” (Moltmann, 1971, 45-46) Ironically, the chains that bind contemporary culture in the serious, slave-like pursuit of perfection through youth can only be broken by the acceptance of that which it fears the most, becoming old.

The world is groundless and bottomless, and precisely for that reason a free zone for the liberty of playing creatively with correspondence to the totally-other God. So the stakes in the game are not realisations, successes and accomplishments but the endless beauties and liberties of the finite concomitants of the infinite joy of the creator. \(\text{ibid}\)
How powerful when a generation living at the end of life, according to our chronological view of life, celebrates the infinite possibilities through laughter and play.

And how challenging when that generation turns its joyful smile upon the rest of the world. For here is the laughter of a generation of ‘old fools’ pointing out that the youthful emperor has no clothes. Bergson sums up the spirit of comedy as “absent-mindedness” (Bergson, 1911, 6) and would possibly embrace, alongside his example of romantic Don Quixote falling into a hole because he was looking at a star, a narcissistic society transfixed by its own reflection.

They too are runners who fall and simple souls who are being hoaxed - But above all they are past-masters in absent-mindedness, with this superiority over their fellows that their absent-mindedness is symptomatic and organised round one central idea, and that their mishaps are also quite coherent, thanks to the inexorable logic which reality applies to the correction of dreams, so that they kindle around them, by a sense of cumulative effects, a hilarity capable of unlimited expansion. (ibid)

The idea that a narcissistic society, even as it is obsessed, enthralled, and consumed by itself, could be absent-minded and ultimately ignorant of itself\(^{201}\), and therefore inelastic, unable to be dynamic, to grow and change, is situated, according to Bergson’s thinking “…on one of the great natural watersheds of laughter.” (ibid, 5)

For him, the most comic is this “…effect of automatism and inelasticity” (ibid) and laughter is the corrective.

It is the business of laughter to repress any separatist tendency. It’s function is to convert rigidity into plasticity, to readapt the individual to the whole, in short, to round off the corners wherever they are met with. (ibid, 87)

\(^{201}\) “…the comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself[sic]. The comic person is unconscious.” (Bergson, 1911, 7)
One could argue that in the canons of contemporary beauty, with its gymn-fascination and botox-erasing of laughter lines in a vain clinging to youth, there lies the rigidity of our society. The only people who could laugh for us and so begin that correction process, are those who still have the freedom and elasticity of facial muscle, and power of facial expression to crease up and laugh hilariously. Those who display the lissom mobility and plasticity of age, as described by Dr Maya Angelou in her poem “Old Folks Laugh”

They have spent their content of simpering holding their lips this and that way, winding the lines between their brows. Old folks allow their bellies to jiggle like slow tambourines. The hollers rise up and spill over any way they want. When old folks laugh, they free the world.

It is more frightening, but potentially transforming, for an age-denying age to crease up and crack up and laugh with older people than to laugh at them because of fear, for to laugh with them would mean to engage in the ageing process.

3. The cavern opens.

The mechanism of fear and worry always keeps men[ sic] down on the ground. Freedom begins when men[ sic] suddenly find themselves to be without fear...All liberation movements begin

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202 "When we speak of expressive beauty, or even expressive ugliness, when we say that a face may possess expression, we mean expression that may be stable, but which we conjecture to be mobile. It maintains, in the midst of its fixity, a certain indecision in which are obscurely portrayed all possible shades of the state of mind it expresses, just as the sunny promise of a warm day manifests itself in the haze of a spring morning. But a comic expression of the face is one that promises nothing more than it gives. It is a unique and permanent grimace. One would say that the whole person’s moral life has crystallized into this particular cast of features. This is the reason why a face is all the more comic, the more nearly it suggests to us the idea of some simple mechanical action in which its personality would be forever absorbed.” (Bergson, 1911,11)

203 Appendix F1.
with a few people who are no longer afraid and who begin to act differently from what is expected by those who are threatening them. (Moltmann, 1971, 37)

If society’s fear of death and its projection upon ageing is becoming magnified and protracted by demographic change, the idea of these small groups of older people, laughing and playing joyfully in the midst of suffering and death, sows even wider the seeds of a liberation movement. In terms of their Christian faith, this dynamism knows no bounds, for their laughter carries echoes of risus paschalis - Easter laughter. In their laughter death itself is undermined and loses its sting. Their joy …displays an unassailable freedom and superiority precisely at the point where the powers and rulers of this world have been reckoning with fear and guilt feelings. And when the partners of these powers and rulers is death, Easter indeed becomes the beginning of the rebellion of the liberated against the bonds of their slavery. (ibid, 51)

To invert Dylan Thomas’s words, when older people not only “rage rage at the dying of the light” but also laugh, laugh with the ending of the night, they are pointing the way towards the deepest freedom. Moltmann’s theology is a dialectic of joy and suffering. Resurrection light dawns from the night of crucifixion. My own participation with the groups of older people reminded me of the proximity of suffering and death which society strives to push away. Their laughter amidst their life experiences demands that suffering is given equal time for reflection in my research overview. Here, it is enough to state that, as the older people joyfully and playfully participated within the groups and supported each other with humour, they were also luminous in their own experiences of suffering and loss. This is authentic to Moltmann’s dialectic.

Resurrection and Easter freedom have the cross of Christ behind them and the physical end of the law, of regimentation

204 I Corinthians 15:54-56.
205 Dylan Thomas “Do not go gentle into that good night” (1980, 159)
and death in the world before them. So Easter freedom does not permit us to escape from the world or to forget about it. Rather it leads us critically to accept the world situation with its unacceptable moments and patiently bring about change in the world so that it may become a place of freedom for all. (*ibid*, 53)

To laugh along with older people is to ground oneself in the reality of life, to become engaged not only with one’s own ageing process, but also with the outcome. To be released from the fear of death is to face up to both fear and reality. To laugh along with older people is to laugh in the darkness.

4. The face dissolves in laughter.

*We shall play with heaven and earth, the sun and all the creatures...All creatures shall have their fun, love and joy, and shall laugh with thee and thou with them, even according to the body* (Luther, WA,XXXVI, 600 in Moltmann, 1971, 57)

I am haunted by the image of a chuckling Jesus walking off into eternity with his female and male friends laughing the laughter of the liberated. (Frazer, 2004, 2)

The face of an older person laughing expresses an eschatological quickening in Moltmann’s theology of joy. Resurrection laughter in death overcome is also the laughter of new life. Moltmann reminds us that the Christian vision of a new heaven and new earth, is not one of eternal retirement and fulfilment of purpose, an eternal cruise which the younger hard-working both resent and yearn for, but one which is

...totally without purpose...a hymn of praise for unending joy...an ever-varying round dance of the redeemed in the trinitarian fullness of God, and as a complete harmony of soul and body [and in] colours of unhindered laughter...of the marvellous riches and goodness of God and of new innocence. Christian eschatology has painted the end of history in the colours of aesthetic categories. (Moltmann, 1971, 55)
There is an alpha and omega quality to the playfulness and humour of older people. Through Moltmann’s theology we can open our eyes to an aesthetic idea of older people encapsulating the joy of God creating playfully and eternally. “…the images for the coming new world do not come from the world of struggle and victory, of work and achievement, of law and its enforcement, but from the world of primal childhood trust.” (ibid) These eternal images are found in the transfigurative moments of life, which is

…not a struggle but a prelude, not preparatory labour but a preview of the future life of rejoicing. The elements of perishable time, which - as a projection of the future - abide in eternity, are found in the moments of grace and faith, in joy and love, of openness and hope, and not in the moments of glory due to achievements and efforts. (ibid)

Older people playing and laughing simply for joy along the margins, or hidden deep within a world of seriousness and fear, offer such moments of eternity, as both challenge and hope for liberation. If older people are participating in God’s free play, then I would argue that they become doxology. Ageing is an expression of worship and praise. Could seeing beauty in older people, be to perceive the glory of God; to embrace the overwhelming height and depth and breadth of the ageing demographic as a visible theophany, God’s glory passing by,206 “…that is the glory of God with which all the earth shall be filled”? (ibid, 59)

Back beyond the classical housetraining of unruly laughter, an old woman in Genesis called Sarah laughed, first with pain and doubt for life’s disappointments then with untrammelled joy at the beautiful blossoming of God’s possibilities.207 And, peering beyond contemporary culture’s fear and alienation of ageing towards the shocking

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206 Exodus 33:21.
possibility of being one among its beautiful generation of liberation, would the old man in the hat and the black rimmed spectacles twinkle a little, then throw his head back, and roar with a laugh which has travelled far from Plato’s idea of that which does not know itself, to the very thing which can reveal the world’s absent-mindedness? A laugh which, in its sheer thrill of the game, has travelled far from Aristotle’s idea of the comic stemming from deformity and ugliness, to the very antithesis of a rigidity and conformity which includes contemporary beauty. A laugh so untamed and free it could travel round the world?
Facing the pain: older people as embodying the suffering of God.

Sometimes the Catskills: revisiting a contemporary view of ageing.

In Somerville’s painting “Sometimes Broadway, Sometimes the Catskills” the old woman sits by a stark winter scene. The bare trees and snow-covered hills may be a window onto a world she is turning away from, or a mirror reflecting a world she is looking towards. Either way, the juxtaposition of age and winter offers a picture of stasis, growth arrested, life frozen. Time’s hands, no longer productive, are folded passively. Time’s mouth has clamped shut, struck silent through loneliness, isolation,
and physical pain, the dumb weight of suffering, as silent as snow.²⁰⁸ “It’s a sad face, you can see the realisation of age in it, it’s a sad life when it gets to that stage, just sitting and waiting…” said Glenda when presented with a similar picture.²⁰⁹ In the context of age and suffering, this picture seems, at first glance, to provide a visual catalyst, not for any argument regarding the transformative nature of older people, as did “The Not So Old Man” but for a confirmation of contemporary culture’s negative attitudes towards ageing; attitudes that marginalise older people, thus creating further suffering. The old woman seems outside of community, even as she sits inside.

Sally Nelson, in “A Thousand Crucifixions: The Whitley Lecture 2009”, when considering the constitution of suffering, finds resonance with

…Dame Cicely Saunders, the founder of the modern hospice movement [who] coined the phrase ‘total pain’ which is probably as close to a generic description as it is possible to get. Total pain has physical, psychological and social components because it recognises that a person is not just a mechanical body with physical symptoms, but a conscious being existing within a complex network of relationships and circumstances, which all contribute to a sense of well-being or otherwise. In other words a person exists within a story. (Nelson, 2009, 9-10)²¹⁰

However, in a society where we “…internalise able-bodiedness as the norm” (Eisland, 1994, 32), where well-being is equated with being well; the accepted trajectory of suffering which accompanies age, the gradual loss of health, abilities and relationships, and the correlating increase of physical, emotional, and spiritual pain, is to be fought against or feared. In culture’s perception, suffering becomes the older person’s whole story, and as such, their authentic, whole story is negated. Ironically,

²⁰⁸ “There are forms of suffering which reduce one to a silence in which no discourse is possible any longer, in which a person ceases reacting as a human agent…the weight of unbearable suffering makes us feel totally helpless, we are stripped of the autonomy to think, speak and act.” (Soelle, 1975, 68, 79)
²⁰⁹ Group 1. (D10)
suffering increases as it is belittled or denied. Two participants in the control group 4 revealed how fear of suffering is connected with age and projected back onto older people when they commented on (D10) that “…she looks very, very old!” and “…she doesn’t look alive to me.” Even as we are invited to look, we do not see. Jean Vanier encapsulates this process in “The Broken Body”, his meditation upon suffering within the L’arche community of people with physical disabilities.

> So many of us flee from people who are crying out in pain people who are broken. We hide in a world of distraction and pleasure or in “things to do”… or if we do not flee from suffering perhaps we revolt in anger… the pain of those who cannot fit into the mainstream of society is so great! they feel useless, a dead weight [my italics] this feeling is shared by so many old people… (Vanier, 1988, 1, 11)

Theologian Paul Fiddes, in his presentation of a practical theodicy quotes a psalm of abandonment, “My friends and companions stand aloof from my affliction”²¹¹ to undergird his discussion of the reasons for culture’s fearful reactions

> People who are healthy and prosperous often abandon those who suffer, through sheer embarrassment, through a feeling of not being able to cope, through fear that associating with the sufferer will bring similar disaster, or because the suffering of another brings too painfully to mind the fragility of life and one’s own vulnerability. (Fiddes, 2000, 155)

For Fiddes, the “revolt in anger” Jean Vanier describes, is against suffering, ultimately, as the pre-cursor of death. The predominance of black in Somerville’s picture suggests that the ageing woman is surrounded by death. It is her foreground and her background. However, we do not desire it to be ours, so we deny it.

> The result of all this denial of death is not only a decreasing ability to face death with dignity…it may also result… in increasing violence in our society. Perhaps we are projecting

²¹¹ Psalm 38:11.
our infantile wish for immortality outwards by inflicting
destruction upon others, to reinforce our conviction that death
is something which happens to others and not ourselves.

(ibid, 225)\textsuperscript{212}

Older people then, do embody suffering in the fullest sense. Their pain is beyond total
because not only do they suffer circumstantially, through the pains of natural ageing,
but also through the attack upon and negation of their personhood, their meaning, as
their stories are in danger of being erased by a fearful culture needing to write its
narrative death-free.

Revisiting an ecclesiological view.

In view of their marginalisation by contemporary culture, Moltmann’s theology of the cross resonates with and embraces a suffering people without a story. In “The Crucified God” he states…

The cross is not and cannot be loved. Yet only the crucified Christ can bring the freedom which changes the world because it is no longer afraid of death. (Moltmann, 1974, 1)

Fiddes, in his critiquing of Moltmann’s theology, develops the idea that suffering, which by its very nature, is so often felt to be meaningless, can find its ultimate meaning when embraced by the story of Christ’s suffering and sacrifice. I do not intend to develop a theodicy through my argument, but I have drawn extensively from Fiddes’ works, “The Creative Suffering of God” (1988) and “Participating in God, A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity” (2000) as the most helpful sources for my new perspective of older people as imaging the suffering of God.

As argued, older people can be marginalised from the story of God’s suffering, at the very point of pain, because church and culture have often mirrored each other in ambivalence towards the concept of suffering. Nelson draws upon Soelle’s writings to identify “…in western society…the existence of apathy, which literally means “freedom from suffering” (from the Greek, apatheia)”213 As one side of a cultural coin, which has violence as its other face, she points to an underlying inability to empathise with the suffering of others.

“Christianity has become a stranger to pain.” We justify our desire to avoid suffering, Soelle says, because of our identification with the remote God of traditional…theism in whose image we believe we are made…in such a model, where God is Almighty, Lord, King, and Judge, suffering is perceived as a

213 Soelle, 1975, 36.
passing phase in which Christ suffered only for a short time on the cross in his humanity: ‘...the apathetic God has won out over the suffering God’ (Nelson, 2009, 28)\textsuperscript{214}

Through a theology rooted in a classical aesthetic of perfection, developing Christianity has always had the choice of turning away from suffering as ‘...the Platonic axiom of the essential apatheia of God sets up an intellectual barrier of the suffering of Christ, for a God who is subject to suffering like all other creatures ‘cannot be God’’ (Moltmann, 1974, 228).\textsuperscript{215} If God does not suffer, then God does not change, and if God does not change, then God does not suffer. Historically, the transcendent God of classical theism, becomes, in a Nicaean assimilation, the implacable immutable God.\textsuperscript{216} A polar and stellar distance grows between immovable unchangeable creator and suffering contingent creation.

In terms of older people as a marginal group in need of meaningful narrative, any attempt to see their suffering selves as an image of God is rendered meaningless if God does not suffer. They are left to find themselves within the imperfectly penned margins of a story of a desire for perfection where suffering can only be the endless result of human sin or the endless beginning of human endeavour to gain spiritual merit. As Nancy Eisland, in her theology of disability, points out

As long as disability [in this case - age] is addressed in terms of the themes of sin-disability conflation [or] virtuous

\textsuperscript{214} ibid, 41, 43.

\textsuperscript{215} Hegel’s view of classical art is resonant as the outward form of this platonic perfection when describing ‘...a concentrated individuality, which freed from the multiplicity of accidents actions and particular circumstances of human life, is collected upon itself at the focus of its simple unity...what we must first remark is their spiritual and, at the same time, immutable and substantial individuality. Far removed from the world of change and illusion, where want and misery reign, far from agitation and trouble which attach to the pursuit of human interests...’ (Hegel, 1820-29a, II, 2a)

\textsuperscript{216} “Nicaea rightly said against Arius, God is not changeable \textit{ie} God is not changeable as creatures are changeable. However the conclusion should not be drawn from this that God is unchangeable in every respect, for this negative definition merely says that God is under no constraint from that which is not of God...If God is not passively changeable by other things like creatures, this does not mean that he is not free to change himself, or even free to allow himself to be changed by others of his own free will.” (Moltmann, 1974, 229)
suffering…it will be seen as primarily a fate to be avoided, a
tragedy to be explained, or a cause to be championed, rather
than an ordinary life to be lived. (Eisland, 1994, 74)

Fiddes balances this argument through his reminder that “…centuries of traditional
belief about the impassibility and immutability of God have been overturned in our
age” (Fiddes, 1988, 16) by new paradigmatic understandings of God as love, as
creator in personal relationship with creation, and by liberation theologies which seek
to express God’s participation in the suffering of oppressed and poor people.
However, where churches continue to mirror, and feed from and into culture’s focus
upon youth, health and being well, that relationship will be distorted. Belief in, and
demonstration of, a God who participates in the whole of creation, including, and
possibly, especially suffering, is the only way older people can be fully restored to
their place in the story of salvation, and be fully visible as active and beautiful
primary organs of the Body of Christ.
**Sometimes Broadway: a participatory theology of suffering.**

In Somerville’s painting, the compacted background and foreground may speak of the compartmentalised darkness of suffering, and possibly death, to the culturised psyche, but black is also squeezed onto the colour palette of the young trees outside. Black is woven also, along with lighter colours, through the patterns of the woman’s dress, reflected in her eyes, and detailed in her one earring, the tiny, powerful reminder of the point of “Sometimes Broadway, sometimes the Catskills.” The woman with the black earring may seem static and passive, but on gazing longer, she might be travelling freely to and from present to past; from permanent rural vacation in the Catskill Mountains north west of New York, to Broadway, the city’s centre stage; her hands holding and steering precious memories, as she twists and turns her wedding ring. Her mouth could be a line of pain, or it could be clamped around many cigarettes once smoked, many songs once sung. What is winter now, was once every season, and will be so again. The point of the picture is not the pain, but the fullness of a life being lived. Suffering is, without a doubt, a great part of her story, but as part of a dynamic life story of growth, of change, of loss, of hope, of endeavour and of overcoming.

Likewise, during my research, although there were some negative remarks about the suffering of older people in the portraits shown, overall, when it came their own participatory suffering and pain, the participants expressed this as part of the whole of
their lives. Conversation and sharing of memories, loss and humour went together.

In Group 4, Jackie commented

…the old lady has wisdom because she has lived life. She has got the look of experience and suffering. (D2)

Just as the black earring suggests that the woman in the picture has a very different narrative than at first perceived, this small but positive correlation of suffering, as part of growth and becoming, could point the way forward for older people to be visible as images of God who participates in the pain of creation.

Fiddes provides the resonant theological ground by drawing upon process theology which “…urges us to think of the world as a living society, growing towards the aims God sets for it through a network of mutual influences, with God himself sharing in the conditions of its becoming.” (Fiddes, 1988, 40) This relationship of co-creation comes into focus through Fiddes’ tracing of a paradigm shift from traditional classical theology towards a perception of God as personal through the growth of psychology and thus experiential awareness of emotions and feelings. Firstly, he highlights the Thomist understanding of God as perfect and simple, predicating God’s immutability and immunity from suffering.

God does not alter and is not in time. God…is entirely actual, without any unrealised potentiality; but things only alter if they are somehow potential. God is also entirely without parts; but things only alter if part of them persists and part of them passes away. God is also infinitely perfect, embracing within himself the fullness of perfection of all existence; but things only alter by acquiring something they do not already have…Only God is changeless. (Aquinas, 1.a.9.1, 1989, 23)

Fiddes then offers his counter argument, asking “If God is not less than personal, and if the claim that ‘God is love’ is to have any recognisable continuity with our normal

217 The research group with the oldest members, were the only group who integrated personal suffering and loss within the modeling of their own faces. Other groups were more distanced.
experience of love, the conclusion seems inescapable that a loving God must be a sympathetic and therefore suffering God…” (Fiddes, 1988, 17) He follows this by offering process theology’s correlation of suffering and a loving God who changes.

There can be no love without suffering. Suffering in the widest sense means the capacity to be acted upon, to be changed, moved, transformed by the action of, or in relation to another. (Williams in Fiddes, 2000, 171)

Here, divine narrative becomes an empathic dialogue of active love between creator and creation, shifting the definition of suffering from ‘that which we do not desire’ to that which is “…defined by what the other requires.” (Williams in Fiddes 1988, 50)

This thinking opens up room both for an understanding of the dynamic vulnerability of God and for an understanding of the dynamic vulnerability of older people, which robs neither of their power, but rather, allows older people back into God’s story and, in the language of process theology, allows creator and creature to journey together towards the healing and liberating understanding of suffering which fearful society requires.

The story of this empathic relationship of active love, which older people could begin to recognise themselves as part of, is based, according to Fiddes, on a triune understanding of God. He highlights the image of the Trinity as perichoresis, or dance, which “…implies a God in movement, even in the process of change, rather than a God whose intellectual love simply moves other things and people through the contemplation of it.” (Fiddes, 2000, 74) Indeed, it keeps alive “…within the

219 This shift also shakes the foundations of the classical correlation between suffering and ugliness, where that which is beautiful is desired, and that which we do not desire is suffering.
220 “…(first used…in a trinitarian context by Pseudo-Cyril in the sixth century, followed by John of Damascus in the eighth), which had the advantage of emphasizing reciprocity and exchange in the mutual indwelling and penetration of the persons.” (Fiddes, 2000, 71)
theological system itself, a challenge to the image of a dominating God whose power lies in immobility and in being secure from being affected by a changing world.”

(ibid) I would argue that, if older people, who age long and change much, yet who are often criticised and marginalised for being set in their ways, can recognise themselves as images of God who is dynamic relationship, then their own diverse experiences and growth would be affirmed as authentic chapters in God’s story. Hymn-writer Brian Wren balances this tension poetically in the hymn “Bring Many Names”

Old, aching God, grey with endless care,
calmly piercing evil’s new disguises,
glad of good surprises,
wiser than despair
(Wren, 1989, 152)

Dialogue always implies distance. Thus, held within this sense of God as dynamic triune relationship is also, for Fiddes, the sense of God’s longing for relationship with creation. Fiddes is himself creative as he puts a distance between the Christian story and the Platonic creative principle, the singular, polar-distancing demiourgos.

Now that which is created must…of necessity be created by a cause. But the father and maker of all this universe is past finding out; and even if we found him, to tell of him to all men[sic] would be impossible. (Plato, 360 BCEd)

He argues that such platonic ideas lead “…naturally to the idea of total transcendence, [an absolute gap] between Creator and created, infinite and finite” (Fiddes, 1988, 95) within traditional Christian thinking. Fiddes admits that he is weaving with mystery when stating, “…God’s choice of his creation is the furthest frontier of our knowledge of God.” (ibid, 74) but his re-imaging of the Creator’s longing for his creation as part of God’s triune heart, transforms an eternally un-traversable distance into a calling into eternal relationship.

When we speak of the Trinity in narrative terms we envisage the Father sending forth the Son in an ecstasy of love, and the Son responding to the Father in reciprocal love…so intense and
overflowing that God desires that other sons and daughters should share in the same relationship. The divine longing is for the movements of the dance between Father and Son to be opened up to include a myriad of other partners...All human creatures are held within the divine intention of the fellowship, at the eternal moment of the begetting of the Son...if God desires to include created persons within the communion of divine life, the dance will not be complete until this has been achieved. The moment of begetting and creating is thus one of humility, and an opening of the divine life to pain and suffering. This Father opens himself to a patient waiting upon creation, a frustration at being rejected and a reconciliation that will cost nothing less than a confrontation with death and nothingness. (Fiddes, 2000, 95)

The painful longing of God for more and more of creation to be included in the dance of love is expressed throughout the Old Testament in terms of God’s covenant-love for the Israelites and their rejection of that love. “I have trodden the wine-press alone.” God says in Isaiah 63:3. According to Japanese theologian Kitamori, God suffers both immanent pain, in solidarity with the suffering creation and its own increasingly broken dance, and transcendent pain,

...the pain of God as principle...[which is] not simply “separation.” It is an axiom [principle] which increases its own axioma [power] by loving and accompanying our historical reality. (Kitamori, 1965, 102)

- “...God’s particular suffering of exile and the yearning to be reconnected.” (Fiddes, 1988, 20) In this re-imaging of God’s suffering, the suffering of older people, particularly their grieving and loneliness, their long-suffering, can find its meaning, both immanent and transcendent, in God’s story. The idea of God both turning away and turning towards his creation in suffering, as his people turn away from him, resonates powerfully. In the oldest research group, Maurice’s poignant expression of suffering love echoes clear and long.

When my wife was ill, her face went thin and very haggard and I found it very hard to look at her. Her appearance was very important to her so I would try and hide my own shock at its change.
In the spirit of the dialogue of the triune dance, Maurice’s words resonate back, bringing new richness to our understanding of the transformative heart of God’s suffering. In the words of Isaiah

…He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him
He was despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hid their faces
he was despised and we held him of no account
(Isaiah 53:3)

If suffering is defined as that which we do not desire, the servant not only suffers his own pain, but becomes the personification and point of suffering, both Creator and creation’s, despised and rejected, isolated and turned away from, marginalised and deemed invisible. Thus, I contend that the suffering of older people, both their own pain and the pain of society’s oppression, can find its meaning in the event of Golgotha where

…God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross.
He is weak and powerless in the world and that is precisely the way, the only way, he is with us and helps us.
(Bonhoeffer, 2001, 134)

Moltmann speaks both out of and over against the classical and aspirational image of God as immutable perfection when he describes God as “…revealing himself in what is most unlike himself, for if God revealed himself in what was exactly like him then only God could know God.” (Moltmann, 1974, 26-8) Swiss mystic Adrienne von Speyr speaks in Trinitarian terms of the cross as “…the moment when the distance separating Father and Son has been widened to embrace the whole world.” (von Speyr, in Fiddes, 1988)221 These insights offer a call for the Christian church “…not simply to look for the like-minded in making its fellowship, but to offer an open

friendship to those who are quite unlike it in order to share fellowship with the crucified Christ.” (Fiddes, 1988, 30) They also offer the church an image of God which would challenge and bring hope of transformation for a youthful culture which worships the immutable through its desire to airbrush and erase all traces of ageing, suffering and change. It is a literal call to ‘take up our crosses’ and to dare to identify with “…the God who identifies himself with men and women to the point of death and beyond.” (Moltmann, 1981, 119) Fiddes journeys on. If God chooses to suffer alongside us, then we too are called to fall in step with those who suffer, as participants of the eternal perichoresis, for “…from the very first moment of creation God was encountering death.” (Mackey in Fiddes, 1988, 9) Whereas Moltmann’s theology places the cross as the culminating point or ultimate depth of God’s identification with creation, Fiddes understands Christ’s suffering as the way through which creation can participate with Creator at ever deepening levels. He argues that we have a God “…whose eternal desire to share in the life of his world reaches a supreme expression at the cross, in a way which opens up yet still new depths of relationship…a deeper death leading to a richer life.” (ibid, 10) The idea of a deeper death as a participatory journey of suffering resonates with my experiences of the older research participants, and older people per se. I discovered that from within their experiences, the Christian narrative of suffering not only gathers them in from the margins to embrace them as a suffering people, and therefore part of the story, but also makes their own suffering transformative for others. They too are re-imaged. What was hidden and therefore unseen is not only now revealed and seen, but can also be perceived as the embodiment of hope and change.

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222 Matthew 16:25.
**A deeper death: a spirituality of suffering as imaged by older people.**

In his later work, Fiddes develops this concept of “a deeper death” stating…

> God opens up God’s own self to the world in vulnerability. God sets out on the road where hurts will happen…God opts to be in the way of being injured. We too, for the sake of love, choose a path where it is likely that suffering will be imposed on us, even though we have no desire for suffering in itself… when suffering does befall us, we can choose it ourselves in the sense of taking hold of it, accepting it as our own and doing something with it. (Fiddes, 2000, 78)

Likewise, in Somerville’s picture, the old woman is doing something with her suffering. As we continue to gaze, she seems to have shouldered, all the while, the image of winter. Yet, in the light of suffering as participatory, she seems also, suddenly, to be leaning back in order for more of the window, or mirror, to be revealed. Her hair and skin take on the colours and textures of the landscape, and in her hand, what at first looks like a handkerchief, resonant of sadness and loss, now takes on the shape and colour of a leaf. She is holding lightly, creatively onto that which has fallen, and that which may come again. Far from the at-first perceived image of static passivity, the picture now has the quality of epiphany. The woman has chosen to be present in her ageing, her life’s suffering, and change, she does not fight it or flee from it, she embodies it; as did the older people of my research groups, in the following transformative ways.

1. Solidarity of suffering.

In the fourth research group, even as ageing was culturally equated with a sense of hopelessness, loss and pain, there was also a connection with age and change, the
process of becoming. The oldest group revealed an ability to mould these changes in their own faces with humour and acceptance. “That’s your character,” said Audrey commenting on the size of Maurice’s nose “…they say your ears carry on growing till you’re ninety.” “When you grow old, you grow like your partner, and your dog.” Maurice replied. When older people own their suffering, be it physical pain or grief or loneliness, and accept it as part of their story, they are entering God’s story of transformative suffering.

The Apostle Paul reminds us that ‘the weakness of God is stronger than human strength’ that the true God is not Zeus the God of thunder but the God of the cross. (1 Corinthians 1: 18-25) This divine weakness is also ‘wisdom’ for there is in fact no greater power than the ability to influence others through suffering love, that is actually to change their minds and emotions. (Fiddes, 2000,139)

As we age, having the imprint of God’s suffering within us, we become active, counter-cultural sufferers. Accepting suffering-change, changes others. In liberation theology terms “…God both protests against the world of the present from the standpoint of his future glory…and he reveals this protest through identifying himself with the suffering Jesus in a way that shakes us out of the present and its assumptions.” (Fiddes, 1988, 89) We are liberated to stand in solidarity with God’s protest, and are therefore potential liberators as embodiments of God’s desire for social justice and change.

Ironically, and subversively, one of the ways that older people embody that protest is through an expression of acceptance, through their finding of consolation in the knowledge that “…God is with them, that suffering has not cut them off from

224 Jackie “… she has got a lot of life ahead of her, where the old lady has wisdom because she has lived life”
   Joan “…she has grown, her face has ‘become’, she used to look really hard.”
God…but God who is with them also suffers alongside them, and so understands their situation from within.” (Fiddes, 2000, 155) The empathic nature of God is reflected through their support of one another, evident in all the groups, especially during the opening conversations and the clay play. Stories of pain and loss were shared, supported and integrated into corporate activity, enabling experiences of suffering to process through what Soelle describes as “…the stage of lament, of articulation, the stage of psalms [which] leads out of isolated suffering through communication…to the solidarity in which change occurs.” (Soelle, 1975, 74) This solidarity with each other and with the faith story which gives all their stories meaning and expression, stands over-against a “…materialist culture that has distanced itself from any meaningful engagement with pain or privation” (Nelson, 2009, 9) and thus in need of new ways to articulate their fear of suffering, which is, indeed, a silent suffering in itself. Thus I wonder if, in the perichoresis of God, older people are called to fall in step with the suffering of younger generations, culture then could find its authentic voice from that which it silences, and its own authentic body image from that which it seeks to hide. For, “…suffering’s greatest work is to become the vehicle of human expression” and so God is revealed in Jesus’ suffering because in him suffering is the authentic expression and communication of love.” (Williams in Fiddes, 1988, 17)

In this way, older people, who become through long experience, who wear their stories as a first skin, who silently, painfully mould their faces out of life’s clay, while all the time, finding consolation through their suffering as God’s story, are the embodied expression of God’s love. “This is a self-portrait,” said Peggy as she

moulded her clay face, despite her arthritic fingers.226 Just as God is, in Fiddes’ contra-Thomist description, “…perfectly related to all the reality that there is; he receives the impact of all the actions, joys and tragedies of the world, so that he can be aptly called ‘the fellow sufferer who understands’” (Fiddes, 2000, 132), older people, in their acceptance of suffering, embody God’s empathy. As a younger person, working alongside people who are my parents’ age, I feel that, older people, with their great reservoir of life’s experiences, will most naturally stand alongside me in my own suffering. This is not a rule, but a comment on experience, affirmed by Nancy Mairs’ writing on the resonant experience of disability.

Because a difficult life is more complicated than an easy one, it offers opportunities for developing a greater range of response to experience: a true generosity of spirit. (Mairs in Eisland, 1994, 47)227

My own relationships and research mark the uncovering of a real transformative gift of older people to the world, but, sadly, as a vibrant empathic listening community, the collective suffering experiences and thus the generosity of spirit of that generation, has, on the whole, yet to be discovered.

2. Integration of life and death.

Terry Pratchett’s needle-sharp humanist argument for assisted death in the Dimbleby Lecture, February 2010, totally contemporary and as old as Socrates, directly opposes the idea of suffering as transformative and suffering people as people of solidarity. Dignity for him is in the end to suffering through death by personal design before suffering robs him of his personhood. Like his father he does not want to “…die a curious kind of living death.” (Pratchett, 2010, 3) He chooses not to suffer.

226 Group 2.
I...vowed that rather than let Alzheimer’s take me, I would take it. I would live my life as ever to the full and die, before the disease mounted its last attack, in my own home, in a chair on the lawn, with a brandy in my hand...And with Thomas Tallis on my iPod, I would shake hands with death. It seems to me quite a reasonable and sensible decision for someone with a serious, incurable and debilitating disease to elect for a medically assisted death by appointment. (ibid)

It is a powerful argument, especially as it springs from the very experience and articulation of suffering at the heart of my research. Even though he speaks about his own debilitating illness, his context is ageing as suffering and dying. However, in his rejection of “...the God argument” (ibid) he negates the possibilities of the contemplation of death, beyond the cessation of suffering, as a way into deeper relationship. Once he has decided on a date for his death, he argues, every day will be precious and lived to the full.

...if I knew that I could die at any time I wanted, then suddenly every day would be as precious as a million pounds.
If I knew that I could die, I would live. (ibid, 5)

This is certainly resonant of Heidegger who

...maintains that the self finds its unity by being confronted with the shock of non-being that death delivers. He diagnoses the self as being broken into fragments by the passing of time; it will only establish its identity by achieving a sameness through past, present and future and concentration of the will upon the fact of our own death will have this unifying force. (Fiddes, (2000, 227)228

However Fiddes points out that “…theologians like John McQuarrie and Paul Tillich have opposed Heidegger’s claim that death should therefore be the ‘master concern’ of our will since God alone is our final concern; but they agree that the shock of non-being, ceasing to be, can awaken us to the power of Being and can integrate our experience of the self in time.” (ibid) Without God, Pratchett’s die-by date compartmentalises rather than integrates existence and non-existence, the shock of

228 Heidegger, 1962, 280-90.
non-being shrinking back from life, rather than opening out into new possibilities. Yet his is the cultural clarion call. Within the Christian narrative, however, older people who live ordinarily with the daily proximity of death also live with the ever-deepening relationship with God who, according to Eberhard Jüngel “...is in the midst of the struggle between possibility and nothingness.” (Jüngel, 1983, 217) A struggle where

...the impossible is always being overcome by the movement towards the possible. This victory is disclosed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. (ibid, 240)

God chooses vulnerability and suffering with creation, yet God embraces the nothingness of death, giving it a place within His very being, without being destroyed by it. For Fiddes, this is because “...out of his desire for his creatures he chooses to suffer, and because he chooses to suffer he is not ruled by suffering; it has no power to overwhelm him because he has made the alien thing his own.” (Fiddes, 1988, 109) In the face of suffering and death, even while embracing it, God is resilient, empathic and creative. When older people carry on with their lives amidst their suffering, their choosing to remain, they help us understand this paradox of suffering yet remaining whole, this resilient God.

In the control group, the most beautiful picture for Karen was a dead tree sprouting new growth. “It ain’t going anywhere, its seen a lot and it ain’t budging, I kind of like its resoluteness, it looks like its survived some storms...” (E9) Through our rapidly growing ageing demographic, when it chooses to stay present in suffering, could God be saying ‘I am still here’? Moreover, could, older people, in their living amidst dying and death, be imaged as the participating in the ultimate divine overcoming?
3. The integration of death and new life.

Wow, this one shows nature and how God creates. That’s gorgeous, you feel that something is dead and has come back to life again. It speaks volumes and it shows I can grow. Even though God says something is dead, something beautiful can grow out of it. It’s not dead. (Lillian, Group 2, (E9))

Lillian’s response to the ancient, ‘dead’ tree sprouting new growth, expresses the resilience of older people who, by their longevity, integrate death with life daily and cumulatively, and also the hope of new life. The generation which images, even as it lives to the full, humanity’s suffering and finitude, also, with cross and resurrection as its defining story, images the God who

…fulfils his own being through suffering with the world but the suffering itself is not the fulfilment of the purpose. What actually fulfils God is the satisfaction of his desire…God...suffers to bring many sons and daughters to glory and in this he is glorified. (Fiddes, 1988, 109)

In their pain, could older people be embodying the doxology of God, revealing more of God’s glory as God continues to reconcile the world to God’s self, their suffering the body language of divine love? Are they a body that claps together the scarred hands of new humanity? As Moltmann says,

…the liberation of man[sic] is achieved through the suffering of God, since we experience freedom as we take our place deliberately in the fellowship of God’s sufferings. So we can truly say…that God moves towards his glory by way of the path of his suffering” (Moltmann in ibid, 64)²²⁹

Older people know the suffering steps by heart and are leading participants in God’s beautiful perichoresis which dances beyond death into new creation, where the lame leap for joy. To choose to follow them is an act of freedom. Indeed, perhaps if we were able to expand our view of the picture of the woman by the wintry window, and

look down to the ground, perhaps we would discover to our good surprise that her feet are beginning to tap to a new tune.

…he will reveal to you the new meaning of pain and darkness how joy springs from wounds of brokenness He will reveal to you that He is hidden in the poor, the weak, the lonely and the oppressed (Vanier, 1988, 9)
Us-them: older people as community.

The two well-turned-out older women in Somerville’s picture “It’s Not For Me To Say” seem to have plenty to talk about. It’s not for me to say, but is this dialogue or gossip? One wonders what secret information, what hidden story kept beneath that wide-brimmed hat, is being disseminated and passed on as ear inclines to mouth and mouth turns to the unseen listener. What hardness of view does the fluffy cloud of hair belie? Is this a picture of two passive older people who have nothing left to do but ‘tell tales’, a response to culture’s demand - your lives are small so just talk amongst yourselves while you wait for the end of the story? “It’s not for me to say,” says the woman in the hat, “all I have left to hold is false modesty. My stories are no stories, my opinions are no opinions but I’ll give them anyway.” “Keep it to yourselves!” says a culture that deigns to incline its ear for a moment, “it certainly isn’t for you to say, and it’s not for us to want to know.” At first sight Somerville portrays an amusingly barbed picture of the ways older people communicate in a world that does not communicate with them; a world which views the story-telling of older people, at best, as coping mechanisms for the limited future of their lives, or, at
worst, an uncontrollable, self-echoing and self-indulgent ‘living in the past’. I have argued that such a description of a cohort, whose dialogue is from themselves, about themselves, for themselves, is merely a projection of and from a prevailing ageist and marginalising in-group culture.

Regarding the church, I have posited that older people, as a whole and distinct group, are in danger of becoming separated from the Body of Christ. They are in danger of losing their voice as conveyers of the Christian story, and of losing their own sense of being within that narrative; even though, as research participants have shown, that voice is still bold, creative and clear, with their integrity of being and belonging strongly upheld. If, as the theological reflection upon suffering has indicated, “…the world as a living society, growing towards the aims God sets for it through a network of mutual influences, with God himself sharing in the conditions of its becoming” (Fiddes, 1988, 40) then the counter-cultural and counter-ecclesial form of older people as part of God’s dynamic community needs to find expression. A fresh perception of older people as and in community is an act of cultural hospitality, welcoming back an excluded group from the margins, and an act of cultural humility. In a fragmenting, individualistic society where cyberspace is more accessible than neighbour, dialogue with older people as cohesive community would be grounding and transformative. And if, as feminist theologian Sallie McFague points out, in her search for relevant contemporary models of God, “…relationship and interdependence, change and transformation, not substance, changelessness, and perfection, are categories within which a theology for our day must function” (McFague, 1987, 7) then the dynamic and interdependent nature of older people in communities could be a revealing of the divine.
Us-them to I-Thou: a Trinitarian imaging of older people.

The woman is smiling as she talks to her companion. With ears visible under hat, perhaps she is listening as well as speaking. Her friend is speaking as well as listening, perhaps to a third person out of view. Between them is a multi-coloured Wurlitzer. Whether organ or fairground-ride, it is between-ground of celebration, music, movement, fun. They are on an adventure, a holiday, enjoying themselves. Now the candyfloss cloud of hair is less of a disguise, more an indicator of a free flowing breeze. Their speech is no longer the only power they have. Perhaps this is dialogue, a sharing of news or enlightening narrative, rather than gossip, and the onlooker is invited into the circle.

My overall impression of the older participants was of supportive and interactive community. In all the groups their interaction was as fruitful as their individual responses. The Group 2 participants’ communal hand-wiping was a cohesive action reminiscent of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet.\textsuperscript{230} They expressed themselves as companions not only with age and experience in common, but with age and experience defining their individual natures as vibrant and unique. The concept of immanent Trinity, described by Fiddes, resonates with the richness of the personality of older people in their community interaction.

When the early church fathers developed the doctrine of the Trinity…they were finding concepts to express an experience. …they were trying to articulate the richness of the personality of God that they had found in the story of salvation and in their own experience…They found God in a new energy and guidance they experienced within their community opening up relationships beyond the accepted social boundaries. (Fiddes, 2000, 5)

\textsuperscript{230} John 13:5
This challenges perceptions of older people as a fading homogenous group and, in Trinitarian spirit, helps us ‘see’ them, and therefore ourselves, in terms of dynamic relationship with God. In Group 2, when talking about themselves as images of God, Maureen, in response to the way they had cheered each other up, commented “… so you could say we are in God’s image because we are doing something which makes each other [my italics] happy.” Her relational view of God resonates with Fiddes’, when he argues that the Early Church experienced God

…not as three personal realities in isolation from each other, but of persons in relation, always interweaving and penetrating each other… The interweaving relationships of Father, Son and Spirit are themselves the source (arche) of the persons, in the sense that the persons are constituted by relations with each other. This vision of God lays stress upon the equality, mutuality and reciprocity of the three persons. (ibid, 6, 76)

This immanent, rather than economic view of the Trinity, with the latter’s stress upon ordering in the household of God (oikonomia), is more relational and less hierarchical. It is, as already stated, the image of the divine dance where “…so intimate is the communion that they [Father, Son and Holy Spirit] move in and through each other so that the pattern is all inclusive.” (ibid, 75) In a profound sense, older people, marginalised by a culture of youth and success, power and productivity, seen homogenously as a burdensome dependence upon the rest of society, are robbed of their individuality and their mutuality, their equality and their movement. They are excluded from a dynamic image of God, and certainly subordinate in any household hierarchy. Yet, a sense of interconnection and interdependence, possibly as a natural result of the wider horizons and deeper experience of long life, becomes increasingly valued among themselves. Their sense of inclusion of one another becomes treasured because of, and in spite of, their exclusion as a social group.
The sense of community interaction and mutual treasuring revealed by the groups is, I believe, what philosopher Martin Buber describes as I-Thou encounter, in his discourse upon humanity’s relationship with God. This sense of true and whole relationship stands out over-against what Buber calls I-it encounters where others are seen as objects pertaining to the viewing subject. Fiddes, in his understanding of immanent Trinity as a movement of relations between three hypostases rather than the hypostases themselves, draws upon Buber who

…contrasted the encounter between persons with the I-it manipulation of objects. We are persons because we can say ‘Thou’ to one another, and because our ego is broken open by the encounter of the Thou of the other. Through that ‘Thou’ of other people…we meet the transcendent ‘Thou’ we call God. To be a person is to experience the ‘betweenness’ that relates ‘Thous’. (Fiddes, 2000, 18)

Buber is profound in his offering back a sense of integrity and personhood to a group who, even in all their interrelating beauty, has been made invisible by an increasingly individualistic and appropriating society, when he states that

…a person makes his[sic] appearance by entering into relation with other persons. I-it is the spiritual form of natural detachment, I-Thou, the spiritual form of natural solidarity of connection… He who takes his[sic] stand in relation shares in reality, that is, in a being that neither merely belongs to him, nor merely lies outside him. All reality is an activity in which I share without being able to appropriate for myself. Where there is no sharing, there is no reality. Individuality neither shares nor obtains any reality. It differentiates itself from the other, and seeks through experiencing and using to appropriate as much of it as it can. (Buber, 1958, 62, 64)

Buber does not reject out of hand the I-it encounter as he understands it as intrinsic to the nature of humanity. He builds up a picture where ‘I-it’ and ‘I-Thou’ encounters are continual ripples of interaction. But ‘I-Thou’ is the “primary word” (ibid, 5).

With ‘I-Thou’ is true relationship.

If I face a human being as my Thou, and say the primary word ‘I-Thou’ to him[sic], he[sic] is not a thing among things, and does
not consist of things. Thus human being is not He or She, bounded from every other He or She, a specific point in space or time within the net of the world; nor is he[sic] a nature to be able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. But with no neighbour and whole in himself, he[sic] is Thou and fills the heavens…I do not experience the man[sic] to whom I say Thou (if I describe him I start to de-assemble him and he[sic] becomes it again) But I take my stand in relation to Him in the sanctity of the primary word. (Buber, 1958, 5)

Buber’s “…rhythmic alternation of the dialogical prioritises the ‘I-Thou’ redressing the potentially damaging predominance of ‘I-it” relatedness developing within our society today.” (Owen, 2009, 3)

Vanier expresses it thus,

Never before have human families been so broken…
The real loss its quality of relationships men and women unable to meet each other’s needs expecting too much from one another –
the cry of loneliness and the need for love can so quickly evoke hatred or a sense of imprisonment.
(Vanier, 1988, 9)

In terms of Buber’s argument, the out-grouping of older people by an ‘us-and-them’ culture, which potentially expresses a dangerous ‘us-or-them’ mentality, is an epoch-shaping ‘I-it’ encounter, and being so, as much an illusion as Narcissus transfixed by his own reflection, which fills a stagnating pool with only an occasional ripple to disturb the surface. As Buber notes “If a culture ceases to be centred in the living and continually received relational event, then it hardens into the world of it, which the glowing deeds of solitary spirits only spasmodically break through…” (ibid, 54)

Without ‘I-Thou’ there is no community, no real cohesion or relationships, just a mass of individuals dividing and coalescing like iron-filings attracted to the magnet of experience. 232

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231 “The logically irreducible concept of the person as one whose uniqueness and particularity derive from relations to others…continues to be desperately needed in our fragmented and alienated society” Lewis, P. (2000) The Message of the Living God: His Glory, His People, His World. Intervarsity Pr., 294.
232 my metaphor
However, one such “glowing deed” which could redress the world of ‘I-it’ is a holistic movement in theology given impetus in part by Buber’s philosophy and to which Fiddes’ Trinitarian theology belongs.

The theological history of the past two centuries is a movement towards taking the human self and the relationship between the self and the body, as a, if not the, prime model for imaging God and God’s relationship to the world…Much of the reason for this shift lies in the current understanding of persons, not as substantial individuals separated from one another and from the world, who enter into relationships of their own choice, but as beings-in-relationship of the most radical and through-going nature…To be a person…is not to be a being related externally to other individual beings, but to be part of - an organic whole that embraces all that is. (McFague, 1987, 81)

The mutuality of community Buber finds in I-Thou encounter is resonant of my experience of older people’s interpersonal relations, which could thus be seen as expressive of a contemporary holistic theology where “each other” is more important than “one another.”

If I stand alongside a group of older people and recognise in them a relational community, a potential for real I-Thou encounters, and if I see myself as part of them us-is-them, rather than us-or-them, so to speak, I hope I am saying to them, however fleetingly, ‘Thou’. Also, if I understand the way Fiddes uses Buber’s relational thinking to define a relational Trinity, then, in taking my stand alongside, I will be drawn deeper into the dance, and so draw from it’s movements some particular cohesive theological strands which older people as community could offer a fragmented society.

233 “Relation is mutual. My Thou affects me, as I affect it. We live our lives inscrutably included within the streaming mutual life of the universe.” Buber, 1958, 15,16)
1. Making friends: older people as a companion community.

… here does the primary word go backwards and forwards in the same form, the word of address and the word of response live in one language, I and Thou take their stand not merely in relation, but also in the solid give-and-take of talk…Here what confronts us has blossomed into the full reality of the Thou. Here alone, then, as reality that cannot be lost, are gazing and being gazed upon, knowing and being known, loving and being loved. (Buber, 1958, 102)

The two women in “Its not for me to say”, although unique in visage, expression and experience, mirror each other in their clothing and their adornments. They are shoulder to level shoulder, close and intimate, with the music of their words between them. They are “…side by side, absorbed in some common interest” (Lewis, 1960, 58). Their dialogue, as it curls out towards the unseen listener is an invitation into a circle of trust. “Its not for me to say” could be a deferring “but it is for you” an opening out towards another’s perspective, the give and take of talk, the language of friendship.

Fiddes’ view of an immanent Trinity, as understood through Buber’s thoughts on the ‘I-Thou’ relationship, offers older people a reconnection with the image of God. Also, in their modelling of a relational community that is “…open, caring, inclusive, interdependent, changing, mutual and creative” (McFague, 1987, 13) they, in their turn, offer reconnection with a society continually seeking to re-order its fractured pieces into differing layers of hierarchy and individualism. McFague’s concern with such a reconnection will be woven into the relational dance. In her exploration of “…mutual, caring, interdependent and responsive” (ibid, 61) metaphors of God, which could speak into our fracturing world, she traces the metaphor of “God as
body…with roots in Stoicism and elliptically in the Hebrew Scriptures…surfacing powerfully in Hegel as well as in twentieth-century process theologies…”

She asks:

If the world is imagined as self-expressive of God, if it is a “sacrament” - the outward and visible presence, or body of God…expressive of God’s very being, then, how would God respond to it and how should we? (ibid)

One particular inter-relation forming repeatedly within the project groups, which McFague forms as a possible hypostasis of God as “body”, is that of philia. Resonant of God’s desire for creation, as explored in “Facing the Pain”, Buber stresses the profoundly mutual nature of the I-Thou relationship in aetiological terms.

You always know in your heart that you need God more than everything; but do you know too that God needs you?...You need God in order to be - and God needs you, for the very meaning of your life. (Buber, 1958, 82)

Adding to this, McFague’s forming of a philial image of God is set in a covenantal context when she notes “The relational character of existence in Hebraic culture is, of course, epitomised in the covenant that binds all Israelites not only to Yahweh but also to each other…” (McFague, 1987, 166) The bonds of our friendship with each other are interwoven with God’s friendship with us, then woven closer anew through the Jesus’ expression of the new covenant relationship in terms of filial love in John 15:12-15. Also, from a phenomenological point of view, Jerrome remarks that

Friends are important in the construction of reality. Dialogue with friends is a source of concepts and categories describing the world; in common with friends one attaches certain meanings to events and relationships, a process which had implications for all areas of social life. (Jerrome, 1992, 74)

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234 “God in His Truth is therefore no mere ideal created by the imagination. Rather, He places Himself in the midst of the finitude and outer accidentality of immediate existence and yet knows Himself in all this as the divine principle which in itself remains infinite and creates for itself this infinitude. Since, therefore, actual subject or person is the manifestation of God, art now acquires the higher right of employing the human form…for the expression of the absolute.” (Hegel, 1820-29b, III)
The envisioning of older people as groups of friends is a cultural and salvific embracing of the meaning and identity of a whole community. Indeed, making friends with older people is a transformative I-Thou moment.

As a true place of meeting, the contemplation of older people as friends is also a reciprocal act of freedom.

Practically all who have written about friendship - Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Bonhoeffer - agree that what distinguishes friendship from other relationships is that it alone exists outside the bounds of duty, function or office…friendship exists in freedom and as such is the ‘rarest and most priceless treasure’ (McFague, 1987, 159)

However, as noted, in its out-grouping of older people, contemporary culture seems to have freely chosen not to make friends. Relations with older people remain I-it.

Buber states

A person makes his[sic] appearance by entering into relationship with other persons. I-it is the spiritual form of natural detachment, I-Thou, the spiritual form of natural solidarity of connection. (Buber, 1958, 62)

If youthful culture continues not to want to make friends with age, to get to know it, to invite it to dinner, to ask its opinions, to listen to its stories, to encounter age in any meaningful way, then age cannot make its appearance. My friend, who had complained that she was becoming invisible as she was becoming older, was speaking an ontological truth. Jerrome assuages this perspective to some extent, commenting that “… it is often thought that older people, who in Britain are not part of the workforce and whose links to the community have become attenuated, are socially disengaged [but there are] a significant minority who are firmly embedded in networks of friends and associates.”(Jerrome, 1992, 1) While applauding the value of

Jerrome’s study of older people in community I disagree with her idea of older people’s inter-personal relationships as belonging to a significant minority. A ‘making friends with age’ would reveal, I am sure, the invisible majority who inter-relate in the following transformative ways.

a. Mutual enjoyment.

In Somerville’s picture the woman in the hat is smiling as she turns, shoulders touching, towards her friend. Her face is open and interested. Her gaze upon her friend reflects the depth of her listening and the pleasure of her engagement.

McFague notes

Friendship at its most elemental is the bonding of two people by free choice in a reciprocal relationship…one chooses to be with a friend because one likes the person and one allows one’s friends just ‘to be’ just the way they are…friendship is composed of affection and respect. (McFague, 1987, 159)

“She’s lovely and she’s lovely inside, you could give her a hug and a kiss if you didn’t know her” said Joan of (D2) in Group 4. Her overflowing with the joy of making friends is expressed the depths of philia revealed in all the groups, through their laughter, their easiness with one another and the sheer pleasure of being in each other’s company. Macfague states “…the metaphor of God as friend is frequent among the mystics, those who enjoy being in the presence of God.”(ibid, 160) and has at its heart “…the joy of being together with others.”(ibid, 167) Through suddenly experiencing the riches of older people simply enjoying each other’s company, could we be surprised into reconnecting with God as friend?

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236 Dionysius describes three stages of spiritual progress as “…the Active Life through the Way of Purification, whereby men[sic] may become true servants of God; the Inner Life, the Way of Illumination and of real sonship with God; and the Contemplative Life which is the Unitive Way whereby men may attain to true friendship with God” Pythagoras. (1956) *The Shrine of Wisdom.* Godalming. 18-19.
b. Mutual support.

In Somerville’s picture, as the listener gazes and the speaker speaks and the shoulders touch, one wonders if there is also supportive bodily contact beyond what we are privileged to see. Is there a fleeting, comforting hand upon an arm, does the body language mirror beyond enjoyable likeness towards support and solidarity?

“For old ladies’ fingers, we’ve done well!” said Mary supportively, in Group 4, commenting on the fragile participants’ efforts with modelling. In other groups there was much self-deprecating laughter at their own efforts alongside their praise of others’. 237 Psychologist and minister Roger Grainger has discovered through group work that

In practice, timid and unsure people tend to work rather more creatively than skilful confident ones. For a group member, skill consists in the ability to give other people confidence so they can share in…the “courage belonging to imperfection.”

(Grainger, 2003, 35) 238

Older people, as friends, accept each other and support each other in their imperfections, their mutual support maintaining community cohesion at a level of wellbeing. In Group 2, Lillian extended her positive experience of an exercise amongst friends when she reveals that she “feels better now that I am part of the church community” thus resonating with Jerrome’s discovery that

…old age associations provide a setting for socialisation to frailty. Friendship influences health not only at the cognitive level but in practical terms as well…Friends have a practical role in coping with illness and disability, a role which is ignored or even denied in other accounts of friendship and primary group relations in old age. (Jerrome, 1992, 107)

If it is, paradoxically “…shared weakness and need that draws its gift of power and healing” (Grainger, 2003, 35) 239 then an older person’s acceptance of imperfection

237 Peggy “You’re making a nice shape, mine’s got a flat head” (Group 2)
could be a real gift of friendship to a society in its lonely endless search for perfection.

It is a gift that challenges the power of perfect by beautifully skewing the symmetry of classical forms of friendship. Jerrome’s description of older people’s practical expressions of friendship which “…include the provision of emotional support and reciprocal visiting, mutually enjoyable social activities and help with transport” (Jerrome, 1992, 107) echoed the mutuality and empathy of all my research groups. The everyday sacraments of lifts offered and received, food provided and consumed, safe spaces made and accepted, concerns to be shared and acted upon, were made simply for friendship’s sake, so challenging the traditional hierarchical understanding of care, and enriching Aristotle’s idea of “…true friendship centred on the good of the other.” (Vanier, 2001, 60) which contemporary culture tends to translate as equity.

We may describe friendly feeling toward anyone as wishing for him what you believe to be good things, not for your own sake but for his, and being inclined, so far as you can to bring these things about. A friend is one who feels thus and excites these feelings in return; those who think they feel thus towards each other think themselves friends…it follows that your friend is the sort of man[sic] who shares your pleasure in what is good and your pain in what is unpleasant, for your sake and for no other reason. (Aristotle, 350BCEb, 1380b35-1381a6)

In contrast, Jerrome discovered

The norm of friendship as practised by older people… permitted, even required a state of imbalance. This model departs from the ideal type found in literature and indeed popular thinking…In contrast to the conventional meaning attached to care and dependence, elderly friends measure a caring attitude by the ability to receive care without the need to reciprocate immediately…The cultural obsession with equity blinds us to the possibility of satisfactory inequitable relationships and the link between being able to receive and being a good friend. (Jerrome, 1992, p.107)

In Somerville’s picture, the two women mirror each other in their empathic relationship without becoming mirror images. They remain unique and separate. In

our in-group culture, with its symmetrical canon of friendship, we believe we cannot make friends with older people because we can only make friends with people like ourselves and the perfectionism of ageism demands that we stay like our young selves for as long as possible. At the heart of popular culture is the loosely veiled I-it, yet on the distant margins, is the challenge of an imbalanced multi-shaping form of friendship that has at its heart the concept of dynamic mutuality, of I-Thou. Friendship as satisfactory inequitable relationship, when reflected upon theologically, resonates with the covenantal relationship of John 15. In this form we have the freedom to be equal with each other, in whatever shape or stage our relationships, rather than losing our unique selves in the tension of being equal to each other. Therefore we are able to enter into the relationship of *perichoresis* where mutuality is vibrant and changing, transcending balance and equity towards new growth and freedom.

c. Mutuality of old friends.

The activities of friendship in later life, include, as in earlier years, mutual help and support, emotional intimacy and the joint pursuit of shared interests. As with younger people friendship for older men and women is valuable as a way of passing the time, as a source of companionship and help and as an opportunity to give and receive affection and intimate attraction. (Jerrome 1992, 76)

I am not arguing for the transformative strengths of such friendship as exclusive to older people, indeed, it will only be through generations becoming friends with one another, that the dance can continue and the Body of Christ become whole. However, “…the difference between later life and earlier years is that friendship may be the only role which involves these activities.” (ibid)
Somerville’s painting of the two friends is from her series “Another Generation: Old People”. Age, without a doubt, is her subject, colouring, shaping and filling each frame of her work. Likewise, within the ageing process, friendship increasingly fills the frame, taking on special significance as an action of hope and solidarity amidst the loss of many other significant relationships and roles. In the interaction of the oldest group, moulding clay and gazing at portraits powerfully evoked memories of lost loved ones. Audrey, even as she moulded her own imagined face, created a memory of her husband, she could see and touch. She greeted him, “That’s my Henry!” Also, for Maurice, visual memories of movie stars and his wife, of beauty, youth, childhood and illness, past and present, all interweave in a new and shared reality.

Myrna Loy…was really gorgeous, but when she played an old lady…her face went so thin…When my wife was ill, her face went thin…Yet when she woke in the morning she had bright blue eyes…there’s my wife as a little girl.

Both participants’ evocation of past into present were understood and accepted by the others who were also living with loss of partners and therefore their closest friends. They had their deep wells of lived love and friendship to offer each other now.

Jerrome remarks “…at periods of intense role learning and role loss, friends function as a valued resource for the individual [and that] intimacy acts as a buffer against age related losses…a major resource and an aid to survival. (Jerrome, 1992, 76, 195) In old age, the protection and power of friendship is also creative and dynamic, and “…lacking in social supports and external control [of younger, chronologically-bound and role-orientated generations] the content of each relationship is unique.” (ibid, 76) 240 A community of old friends does not merely assuage and replace the loss of

240 If friendship itself is a concept notably lacking in social constraint, the idea of older people making friends is a double act of freedom.
one set of friends for another, it is a community which accepts and gives space to the mystery and pain of loss, yet allows lost relationships to remain real and integral to new-found relationships and therefore allows experience to process within and towards wholeness. For a culture where friendship has horizontalised to a cyber-degree, epitomised by the gargantuan expansion of social networking, the deep, relational, solidarity model of friendship offered by older people calls to solitary Narcissus that he is not alone and helps give visible form to the Body of Christ. It is a model that reflects the Hebraic covenantal character of relationship with God and with each other. Solidarity friendship says

...“we are not on our own”, but it also says “we are not on our own” As a model of God’s relationship to the world it says that we do not belong to ourselves, but it also says we are not left to ourselves. In stressing mutuality, commitment, trust, common vision and interdependence, it denies possession but defies despair. It is a model of hope. God is with us, immanent in the world as our friend and co-worker, and immanent in the community of friends called the church, which is a gathering of those committed to the vision, of a healed, liberated world. (McFague, 1987, 166)

The image of old friends as resonant with the divine image of perichoresis, seeking and delighting in each other’s company; accepting, supporting and deferring to each other’s different personalities, situations and experiences; freed from and even transcending social and chronological constraints, is as Jerrome states pragmatically

...a manifestation of the strong face of ageing. In this setting the old[sic] are powerful and independent, confident of themselves and their importance to each other. It is an unfamiliar image. The expansive and powerful face of old age is unfamiliar and unrecorded, party because it occurs in private. The segregation of age groups...means that these powers are not exposed to age-mixed audiences. (Jerrome, 1992, 195)

The only way to discover the powerful face of old age, and therefore, in terms of the ‘body’, to continue to seek the face of Christ, is to make friends with ‘old’, to linger a while by the Wurlitzer, to dare to say good morning to the two women deep in
conversation, who may then turn to you, greet you like a long lost friend and draw you into their story.
2. Making family: older people as a generative community.

As I have gazed upon the two women in “It’s not for me to say” I have been solely focused on the Wurlizer-like dynamic relationship between them. Yet I should notice also that the gaze of the hatless woman is directed outward, towards myself. I cannot remain an outside observer, either of the women, or myself. I am being drawn, perichoresis-like, into the circle of relationship. I have traced the ageing forms of the two women, and yet, being drawn in, I also become aware of myself and how I am defined. Either of these two women could be my mother or, in my memory, my grandmother. I am of a different generation. Yet, in being so, I am welcomed. Both my personal experience and research reveals that older people not only seek out and delight in each other’s company, but also delight in their familial status as one generation connected to another. Former Chief Executive of the NSPCC, Jim Harding, states

> Of all the relationships open to us, becoming a grandparent is one of the most exiting…The most striking feature of the grandparent’s club is how joyful it is…Grandparents I know are often happiest when talking about their grandchildren and, viewed from the other side of the relationship, children often brighten up when talking about their grandparents. (Harding, 2002, 1-2)

Across my research groups many portraits were deemed attractive because of family connection and, again, their associations transcended chronology as they spanned generations. For Joyce, in Group 1, (D18) “looks like a fun granddad”. In Group 2, Norah and Lillian both found little girl (D6) attractive.

Norah: I love children, she’s gorgeous.  
Lillian: she reminds me of my granddaughter.

Likewise, brothers\textsuperscript{241}, nephews\textsuperscript{242}, and mothers\textsuperscript{243} were recognised and delighted in.

\textsuperscript{241} Norah “(D18) reminds me of my brother, he had a nice gentle smile” (Group 2)
In her search for images of God relevant to a changing world, McFague critiques traditional Western images derived from the political arena where “…the concern is with how we govern our lives [yet] a deeper question is how we live at all and how well we live.” (McFague, 1987, 81) McFague’s tracing of a theological shift in the last two centuries from power to relationship-based understandings of God leads her to state…

Much of the reason for this shift lies in the current understanding of persons, not as substantial individuals, separated from one another and from the world, who enter into relationships of their own choice, but as beings in-relationship of the most radical and thorough-going nature…To be a person…is not to be related externally to other individual beings but to be part of an organic whole that embraces all that is. (ibid)

In the spirit of perichoresis through which a weaving of Fiddes, Buber and McFague enabled the embrace of older people as imaging God as friend in community, one can gather from the above premise that any inter-personal model will also be trans-generational. McFague is radical in her challenge of traditional hierarchy by offering relationship of God as mother as well as lover and friend as empowering alternatives.

To say that God is present in the world as mother/lover/friend, of least and in least in all creation is to characterise the Christian gospel as radical, surprising love. We are attempting to see the possibilities of expressing that love with the help of images reflecting the most intimate and important human love relationships…God as parent of the world represents God as creator intimately and impartially concerned with life in all its manifestation and levels. God as ‘parent’ is on the side of life as such. Life is not something alien to God but as God’s body (which is not identical with God), is expressive of God’s very self, even as children although independent, are expressive of their parents. (ibid, 91)

McFague’s imaging God as parent, thus creative; as lover, thus salvific; and as friend, thus sustaining, permits me to extend the metaphor positively to older people as

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242 Jackie found the portrait of the young boy (D9) most attractive as she recognised her nephew in him “He looks like he’s got a spirit of adventure, full of devilment.” (Group 4)
243 Norah picked (D7) as her favourite portrait as it looked like her mum. (Group 2)
grandparents. However, from a socio-psychological viewpoint “…while statuses such as grandparenthood might seem to confer a kind of age-related social identity upon individuals, people are now becoming grandparents across an ever-widening portion of their adult life-span…” (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000, 51) In chronological terms, grandparenthood is no longer the exclusive privilege of older people. Ideally, this should mean a drawing together of generations upon new common ground, but market forces deem, instead, the increasing rejuvenation of grandparenthood, thus blurring a traditionally well-defined social role of great age. However, by extending McFague’s model and reflecting on God as grandparent, older people in this role would transcend any social or chronological understanding by finding their own identities deeply and authentically rooted in God’s body. Having already described friendship and humour of older people as sustaining and understood their suffering love as salvific, to perceive them as the world’s grandparents, and great grandparents would allow them to be re-imaged as God’s creativity, in the following ways. 244

a. Mutual love.

In Group 2 when Lillian began to mould her own face, firstly it reminded her, literally, of her own suffering and brokenness, as she had used clay as physiotherapy for a broken wrist. Then she made her face look sad “because that is how I feel today.” However, as she became increasingly sustained by the love, support and laughter of her friends, she began to see her own face, with humour, through the eyes of her grandson. “Thomas would say I look like an alien. A man from outer space.”

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244 This is in itself a creative act for as McFague says, “…as a metaphor, the relationship of divine agency and the world as God’s body, to human agency and the human body, is one of analogy, not correspondence…it both fits and does not fit. If it is illuminating in certain aspects it is nonsense in others, and part of the skill of using metaphors appropriately is knowing the difference…For the sake of the shock of recognition that the organic model brings - the recognition that we are profoundly interrelated in all forms of life, including God’s - we must risk its nonsense as well.” (McFague, 1987, 94)
Buber argues that a child will have more I-Thou moments because his/her experience has not yet begun to be compartmentalised,

...the thing, like the I, is produced late, arising after the original experiences have been split asunder and connected partners separated. In the beginning is relation - as category of being, readiness, grasping form, mould for the soul, it is the \textit{a priori} of relation, the inborn Thou (Buber, 1958, 27)

One wonders whether, even later than Buber’s late, towards the end of life, when carefully built life boundaries are broken down through many forms of loss and the “...streaming mutual life of the universe” (ibid, 16) breaks through, the “inborn Thou” is freed once more into the creative present moment. The connection between grandparent and child can indeed form another important intimate human love relationship that could resonate with the world’s interrelating with an inter-related God.

b. Impartial love.

Alongside this special intimacy is a unique impartiality. In Group 4, when critiquing her clay visage, Mary commented “I can see it’s some resemblance of a face, but I should have brought my granddaughter and said ‘here you are, you do it’.” Mary wryly linked her creativity with that of her granddaughters’, revealing, not only a desire for her presence, but also a desire to nurture and to pass on that nurture. McFague says of parenting that “All human beings have the potential for passing life along, for helping to bring the next generation... into existence, nurturing and guiding it and working towards its fulfillment...” (McFague, 1987, 105) The same is surely true with grandparenting. However, with the latter, this desire and potential is expressed in a love defined by its light hold and its ability to give back, the literal physical giving back ultimately to the parent’s care when a child is young, and the
ultimate standing back, whatever gifts of wisdom and experience have been given, to
give space to the next generation without any call on a return.\textsuperscript{245}

An understanding of love as unifying and reuniting is basic
to an interpretation of Christian faith as destabilising,
inclusive non-hierarchical fulfilment for all. It is the love that
underscores the interdependence of life in all its forms, the
desire to be with other beings both in their needs and in their joy.
Nonetheless, the depth of divine love can be characterised as
agapic, for the distinctive feature of this love is its impartiality,
its willing of existence and fulfilment for all being…Parental
love is the most powerful and intimate experience we have
of giving love whose return is not calculated…it is the gift of
life as such to others (McFague, 1987, 103)

Grandparental, and great-grand parental love, as given by older people who are more
likely to contemplate the reality of the passing on of their own lives, has a unique
impartiality with a “…profound awareness of the preciousness and vulnerability of
life as a gift we receive and pass on, with appreciation of its value and its desire for
fulfillment.” (ibid) McFague uses Julian of Norwich’s reflections on the motherhood
of God to illuminate an inclusive image of God as creative and renewing.

We see that Jesus is the true Mother of our nature, for he made
us. He is our Mother too, by grace, because he took our
created nature upon himself. All the lovely deeds and tender
services that beloved motherhood implies are appropriate
to the Second Person. (Julian of Norwich Ch 59, 1966, 168)

Perhaps, in the nurturing qualities of grandparents, both male and female, who, living
long and far below the radar of social and gender pressures of middle generations,
grow intimate and impartial I-Thou relations between old and young, there can be
found the depths of God.

\textsuperscript{245} - in the spirit of Psalm 90:17. Psalm 90 has been attributed to Moses as he “…stands looking at the
Promised Land to which he has been headed all his life. Now it dawns on him that he will not go there.
He embraces that painful reality that his life-pursuit of fidelity will stop short of fruition. He submits to
that reality from God…” (Brueggemann, 1984, 110) in trust that God will carry on his work.
3. Making memory: older people as a storytelling community.

*I arrive at the fields and broad mansions of memory, where
are laid up the treasures of countless images, brought there
by all manner of experience... Out of the same store, I
continually weave into the past new and newer images of things
I have experienced, or, on the basis of experience, have believed.
And from these too I fashion future actions, events and hopes,
and reflect on all these again as if they were there.
(Saint Augustine. Confessions, Book X, IX, 1983, 248)

As the Wurlitzer whirls and the cloud of hair blows I am increasingly drawn into the
story told by the women in Somerville’s picture. I, the onlooker, become the ride-
sharing child, delighted and nurtured by whatever tale may not be ‘for her to say’ but
she just has to tell, again and again as she spins. Likewise, as participant observer, I
was transfixed by the stories so spontaneously woven by the participants from
experience’s yarn and through the portraits shown. As well as reminiscent-Maurice’s
story-shaping, “when my wife was ill…”246, Group 2’s Lillian said of (D17) “…she’s
so sorrowful for what’s happened to the world”, while Maureen responded to
(D3)“…she looks so happy, just so happy, she’s amazed that things are so beautiful
around her.” Reminiscence and storytelling formed the greatest difference between
the older groups and the control group. While the younger people took a more
critical, analytical view of the pictures, commenting upon aesthetics and production,
the older people immediately engaged at a narrative level, giving each face a story
within a context. “I’m trying to read his eyes, he looks so sad with the world,” said
Maureen of (D4). While they engaged, they also recognised, as in a mirror, the
supreme authorship of age. In Group 3 Beryl said of (D5) “ he has lots of stories to
tell”, and Joan (Group 4) said of the same man, “ he looks as though he has a tale to
tell”. It takes a storyteller to recognise a storyteller.

246 Group 3.
However, Somerville’s two women are not merely passing the time of day with their tales, on their yarn spins the very axis of time. French philosopher Paul Ricoeur “…has been greatly pre-occupied with the importance of narrative to human identity and with reconstructing a viable ‘historical consciousness.’” (Sheldrake, 2000, 18)

Our whole identity, Ricoeur argues, individual and collective, is formed in time shaped by narrative, whether it be historical or fiction, as is narrative shaped by time.

The world unfolded by every narrative work is always a temporal world. Or…time becomes human time to the extent that it is organised after the manner of a narrative; narrative in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience. (Ricoeur, 1984, 3)

In the context of a post-modern dialectic which critiques an overarching, objective modernist view of history while refusing to throw out the profound power of story along with the historical meta-narrative247, a marginal cohort, whose narratives are shaped by time, holds within its own story-telling gifts, the very stuff of identity. Thus, Ricoeur’s reflections upon narrative fall into step alongside Fiddes, Buber and McFague as predicates to the re-imaging of older people as the inter-related community of the divine.

a. Remembering

Riceour states that “Narration…implies memory” (ibid, 10) thus helping define the particularity of age as a necessary and abundant repository of images of the past.

Now what is it to remember? It is to have all the images of the past. How is this possible? Because this image is an impression left by events, an impression that remains in the mind. (ibid)

247 “Ricoeur shares with postmodernist thinkers the belief that we must renounce any attempt by history to ‘decipher the supreme plot’. However, Ricoeur also rejects a tendency to equate this renunciation with the impossibility of history as a form of narrative. In fact he argues that the former search for a supreme plot or metanarrative actually undermined true narrative because it sought to transcend context and the particularity of all stories.” (Sheldrake, 2000, 18)
At a sociological level, Paul Connerton supports this definition in his argument for the existence of collective as well as individual memory. He describes a pre-industrial society that resonates with McFague’s God-image of creative inter-generational love.

Until the introduction of the first machines it was the grandmother who was mistress of the household, who prepared the meals and who alone, was occupied with the children. It was her task to teach the language of the group… so that is from the oldest member of the household that the memory of the group was mediated to them. (Connerton, 1989, 39)

This is further contextualised in the power of trans-generational Jewish story telling, with Deuteronomy encapsulating a “…profound theology of memory.” (ibid, 45)

Here, on the banks of the Jordan, God’s people responding to God’s urging to remember, is, according to Walter Brueggemann,

… a historical activity. To practice it is to affirm one’s historicity. It is to acknowledge that there is movement and change, that there is contingency and discontinuity. It is to reflect upon the dissonance between how it was and how it is. (Brueggemann, 2002, 50)

To tell the story of a community is to develop and nurture the relational model of community noted by McFague as one of “…relationship, interdependence, change and transformation.” (McFague, 1987, 7) Moreover, it is the biblical covenantal role of one generation to tell the next, to pass on the precious gift of life.²⁴⁸ The more a story is repeated, the more it changes, thus always moving towards new meanings. Indeed, in a fulfillment of covenant meaning, the image of a parable-telling Messiah who in a last meal with his disciples implores them “This is my body given for you: do this in memory of me” is the literal embodiment of God as story.²⁴⁹

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Ricoeur’s “…basic hypothesis [is] that between the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human experience there exists a correlation that is not merely accidental but that presents a trans-cultural necessity” (Ricoeur, 1984, 52)

Thus, for older people as imaging God’s storytelling community “it’s not for me to say” becomes “for life to carry on in any meaningful way, it is imperative for me to say.” Connerton points out that the Ancient Greeks called stories *geroi*. Age and narrative have long shared the same semantic field, which still lies fertile, beneath the floods of post-industrial social recall. Educational and military institutions, television, newspapers and Internet have neither dampened nor destroyed age’s power to spin the yarn. The participants naturally expressed themselves and described their world in narrative terms, which, when seen in biblical and historical contexts, is reminiscent, not of any static living in and for the past, but rather of dynamism and change. Older people image God as storytaker and storyteller, yet their stories are seldom heard.

b. Imagining.

Pastoral theologian James Woodward perceives and points out the creative relationship between memory and imagination within every individual.250

> Everything we have ever seen and every person with whom we have spent time have somehow been translated in our brains into images and feelings and we can immediately conjure a host of them from the most strange and intimate centre that is ‘me’… When I seek to tell my unique story, it is by linking together memory and imagination. For then I can gather lost moments and experience, overcome the gap between the past and present, bring them together and hold them as one (Woodward, 2008, 193)

Grainger is concerned with how these stories are shared imaginatively within communities. Both perspectives mesh with the ways the participants embraced and

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250 “Imagination is that power of the mind through which materials of sensation become persisting objects of the perceived world. It is also the power through which our environment becomes shaped and moulded by the human mind.” (Hedley, 2008, 47)
imbued each portrait with a narrative thus enriching and giving meaning to their own community, through and beyond each individual story, with echoes of *perichoresis*

…we make use of human reality in order to live out our imagination, in corporate rituals and dramas in which people, places and times are all equally real, equally concrete…to produce the living symbol of human relatedness, the experience of individual personhood without which there can be no reaching across, no sharing of life…The shape of the story gives life its symbolic dimension…The life histories of the group shows them taking on their own corporate story, which is different from and more than the aggregate of the individual narratives contained within it. This shared myth making gives shape and content to people’s spiritual lives as, in Martin Buber’s words “it” becomes “Thou”, inspiring and blessing. (Grainger, 2003, 31)

Is it such a leap of imagination to tell the story of a story-telling generation in terms of their vivid and dynamic, time-transcending, community-building mental acuity rather than repeating the worn out, marginalising tale of a fading land of forgetfulness?

Ricoeur shapes his understanding of history to include imagination. History is narrative, which in the past had been hidden by what he sees as false dichotomies of fiction and fact, myth and history. Taken as narrative he finds that history has a common plot.

As a narrative, all history has to do with “some major achievement or failure of men[sic] living and working together, in societies or nations or any other lastingly organised groups” This is why, in spite of their critical relation to traditional narrative, histories that deal with the unification or the disintegration of an empire, with the rise and fall of a class, a social movement, or religious sect, or literary style, are narratives. (Ricoeur, 1984, 150)

Back at the fair, the candyfloss-haired woman’s comment “it’s not for me to say” not only shimmers with irony, but is also the kernel of her story. The story, with the common plot of humanity failing to live and work together, of the shameful way that her story-telling generative community is becoming no longer heard or listened to.

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“It’s not for me to say” is a succinct title for the story of unheard stories told by very best storytellers. Ricoeur continues,

Every story…in principle explains itself. In other words narrative answers the question “why” at the same time that it answers the question “what”. To tell what has happened is to tell why it happened. (ibid, 152)

In the story of older people, if the telling of a story is a transcendent act of imagination, the refusal to enter into it is a gross lack of imagination and here lies the common plot of human failing. Theologian Hedley argues that, to a large extent, “…the dramas of the modern world proceed from a profound disequilibrium of the psyche, individual as well as collective, brought about largely by a progressive sterilisation of the imagination.” (Hedley, 2008, 127) The act of imagining new ways in which older people symbolise the divine becomes imperative when the symbolic dimension of their storytelling is increasingly unrecognised in a youth-perfecting society’s unimaginative desire to rush to erase its own storylines from its face.

The concept of imagination, as with other rich symbolic seams I have drawn upon to re-describe older people as images of God, has itself been undermined, and thus under-mined, throughout the history of Western thought. Hedley traces, Ricoeur-like, a dichotomy between imagination and reason, to Plato who “…expressly subordinates ‘imagination’ to ‘reason’ and yet is a supremely imaginative philosopher.” (Hedley, 2008, 14) He quotes Spinoza’s Ethics II critique of the theological imagination as containing

… all those ideas which are inadequate and confused…those who do not understand the nature of things, but only imagine them, affirm nothing of things and take imagination for understanding, they therefore firmly believe that there is an order in things, ignorant as they are of things and their own nature. (Spinoza, 1687, prop.41; 149, I, app: 110)
Spinoza’s seventeenth century rationalist philosophy lay the groundwork for the Enlightenment’s ‘Age of Reason’ and much modern Biblical criticism, where imagination is “…inferior to discursive reason and the highest cognitive level, rational intuition [which] grasps the necessity of all events in the universe as proceeding from the divine substance.” (Hedley, 2008, 13) Yet, ironically, in the Romantic period “…the emphatic espousal of the imagination as a cognition, coincided with a revival of Platonism” (ibid, 16).

The way the stories told by the research participants formed into vignettes with the descriptive qualities of poetry, from a portrait’s eyes speaking volumes or being “Mrs Wrinkled and Wonderful” to stones like babies feet and trees like wrung out clothes reveals, in my opinion, what Wordsworth called in The Prelude “amplitude of mind” (Wordsworth, 1805, XIV, 188-92) Here is the ability of the poet and contemplative to see “… the objects of the visible world with the eye of ‘steady imagination’ as ‘altered into their own eternal meaning’” (Stewart in Hedley, 2008, 24) through which an older person imagines and images the divine. In Platonic language, that which society deems as most imperfect, is able to reach out to perfection.

Coleridge speaks of imagination as bringing the whole soul of man[sic] into activity. He is explicit about the role of the imagination in a total response to God. (ibid)

Thus, cognitive remembering’s mental acuity and imagination’s graceful leaps duet to reveal the great capacity of mind of those who are better known for their forgetfulness and senior moments. Through listening to their stories, a hidden strength and beauty

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252 Joyce, Group 1.
253 Norah, Group 2.
is revealed in their capacity for transcendence. According to Hedley, this is an embodied capacity.

Imagination is the index of our amphibious nature. We are animals and our bodies are very important components in our minds - hence even the power of the image of the mind is located in the body. Yet the most somatic images can be a sign of the human capacity for transcendence. The capacity for transcendence is linked to an ontology of the ‘image’ or ‘icon’ in which the sensible cosmos is viewed as a likeness of the intelligible reality which is its source. The imagination itself is an instance of that force of the Divine within humanity, awoken by heavenly eros, which arouses the longing to the divine origin. (Hedley, 2008, 78)

In a subversion of Platonic apotheosis of reason, it is the embodied imagination that reconciles immanent and transcendent. In Wordsworthian dialectic “…the imagination [is] Reason in her most exalted mood.” (ibid, 22) In contemporary culture, neo-classical in so many ways, there is also an ongoing, popular revival of imagination and narrative. From the fractured vessel of the meta-narrative have flowed many other narratives. From the importance of ‘back story’ in modern film-making, through the dependence on story in marketing; the interest of organisational theorists in story-telling as management strategies; the recognition of the importance of sharing story in therapeutic situations; the embracing of story in Christian youth work, to a recognition of the pressing need to preserve oral history of two World Wars, imagination is forming a new paradigm. This makes any lack of imagination in engaging with older people even more of a human failure. It is time to change the plot and instead of being unable to bear to imagine the loss that ageing incurs, actually begin to dare imagine the riches and gains of a different story. It would be a story to enrich others as it is wrought from that profoundly creative imagination which enjoys “…a richness of interior life, an uninterrupted flow of images [and sees] the world in its totality [thus redeeming] the failure of the man[sic] without imagination…cut off
from the deeper reality of life and from his own soul.” (Eliade, 1991, 20) For a story
told by age is one which would have formed, in a phrase coined by Ricoeur, a \textit{longue duree}

...by means of the slowness, the weightiness, the silence of long-lasting time [thus] history reaches an intelligibility that belongs only to the long life-span, a coherence that belongs only to durable equilibriums, in short, a kind of stability within change [and still embracing] the diversity of life - the movement, the different time spans, the rifts and variations” (Ricoeur, 1984, 104)

Joan’s response to (E4) describes \textit{longue duree} - “its age but it goes on and on, it’s old but it’s always there - like the world, well, life”$^{255}$

It is a story that, by gathering up the past “… all the relationships, all the experiences of beauty and sorrow, love and loss, all that we know to have been authentic and all that has formed and changed us and made us what we are,” (Woodward, 2008, 194) forms the present. Connerton states

...our experience of the present very largely depends on our knowledge of the past. We experience our present world in a context which is causally connected with past events and objects and hence with reference to events and objects which we are not experiencing when we experience the present. (Connerton, 1989, 1)

Thus it is a story which offers back depths of meaning to a sibling society who, in its living for today, has marginalised the past from the present. If “…concerning social memory in particular… images of the past commonly legitimate a present social order” \textit{(ibid, 3)} then this story is a wake-up call for society from its ontological amnesia.

People of the \textit{longue duree} not only spin a tale from the long perspectives of the past, to form the present, they cast on into future’s unknown territory.

$^{255}$ Group 4.
… the subject matter, the thing remembered and re-lived is the substance of our past life as we perceive it here and now in the part it is playing within our experience of the present. This is the human thing that provides a stepping stone into the unknown…What we know and can remember and the form which we are able to remember it, carries us nearer to realities we are not yet ready to envisage. It is a powerful token of those realities. (Grainger 2003, 83)

Age could be the hidden door to an expectant future, which, argues Ricoeur, is the analogue to memory. In turning within the present to face the unknown ahead we allow ourselves to expect a future, instead of trying, in our fear, to bury the future under the present, to make the unknown, known. Older people in western society, having long been symbols of fearful unknown, are transformed by their storytelling into the very way into the unknown. For, it is a story that, by accepting unknown futures, also respects the ending of chapters. It seeks “…to deal with past events and experiences, and to seek wholeness in life, to seek ultimate meanings in life and to come to a completion of living,” (Mckinley, 2001, 71) all the while continuing to celebrate life and “…create ourselves until the very point of our death” (ibid, 73) Yet, the older person’s story is stronger than endings. From a therapeutic perspective that also resonates with the biblical covenant to remember, Grainger sees that “…the most important characteristic of personal story is in fact its nature as a construct…personal stories are modifiable rituals.” (Grainger, 2003, 88) Such a story is open to interpretation, placing teller and hearer in dynamic dialogue. Stories are

256 Ricoeur draws from Augustine’s concept of the three fold present when he states “…by entrusting to memory the fate of things past, and to expectation that of things to come, we can include memory and expectation in an extended and dialectical present which in itself is none of the terms rejected previously: neither the past, nor the future, nor the pointlike present, nor even the passing of the present… “It might be correct to say that there are three times, a present of past things, a present of present things, and a present of future things” (Augustine’s Confessions. Book II 20:26 in Ricoeur, 1984, 11)

catalysts for change because as constructs they themselves are open to change and the more re-framing of the narrative, the more the malleability and dynamism of life.

The fact that we can so often bring this off is actually a sign of strength, not weakness. Human beings are creatures who are able to change the world for themselves by altering their attitudes towards it. (*ibid*)

Grainger states we discover early our ability to handle narrative in this way. I have observed that by the time we have a long-lived wealth of experience and have developed a sense of our history-laden present, we narrate our lives with expertise. The reflexive and continuous storytelling of age becomes a shape-shifting strength that leaves younger storytellers seeming stiff and inflexible. Theirs’ are stories of whole and inclusive community, filled with humour, friendship, family, love and loss.

Older people can use even, or especially the traumatic events in their lives

… to signify, in retrospect, not the end of [their] story but simply the culmination of a stage in its plot. Without this the story cannot continue and develop. What once appeared to make nonsense of the whole enterprise of storytelling turns out to be the necessary condition for a new and better story, in which genuine endings allowed beginnings, which were really new, not merely an extension of the former state of affairs and old questions received new answers (*ibid*)

Older people’s narrative is not a story about the end of the story, as society fears it would be if it dared to listen, but a whirling Wurlitzer story about continual new beginnings, of little resurrections, of coming to completion in order to begin again.

*And if, in the changing phases of man’s life*
*I fall in sickness and in misery*
*my wrists seem broken and my heart seems dead*
*and strength is gone, and my life is only the leavings of a life;*

*and still, among it all, snatches of lovely oblivion*
*and snatches of renewal*
odd, wintry flowers upon the withered stem, yet
strange new flowers
such as my life has not brought forth before, new
blossoms for me –

then I must know that still
I am in the hands of the unknown God,
he is breaking me down to his new oblivion
sending me forth on a new morning, a new man.

“Shadows” (Lawrence, 2007, 797)
Coming face to face with the old woman, in a dense wood in the depths of winter, in Somerville's painting “The Old Woman and the Toad”, is a disturbing, disorientating experience. Her wizened face, unfocussed eyes and meeting of hooked nose and chin; the toad, crouching, like a familiar among her black cape-like clothes; the dim, pathless, snow-blasted forest, stir the cauldron of my childhood fears, already fired by Grimms’ fairy-tale kindling. Perhaps she is “…really a wicked witch who waylaid boys and girls” (Williams-Ellis, 1965, 221) and just out of the picture is a house made of cake and I will be lured like Grettel into her trap. Or perhaps she is “The Old Woman in the Wood”258 a treasure-hoarding crone with the power to turn princes into

258 The Old Woman in the Wood: Grimm’s Fairy Tales.
trees, who I must run away from or she will seize me with her rough grasping hands and hold me fast.²⁵⁹

Or in the eyes of a middle-aged woman, the painting becomes a magic mirror that, in an inversion of Sleeping Beauty, reveals my future as cold and alone, dehumanised and alienated, homeless bag lady, lost in the land of forgetfulness, colours faded to limited palette, skin the pallor of formaldehyde and texture of toad, ugliness embodied. I do not want to go there. Whether in childhood or adulthood, in fairy-tale or projected reality, this old woman is to be rejected or overcome, the forest a place of placelessness to be avoided. These responses are expressions of the age-old First World perspective this thesis rejects and seeks to overcome. However, once I had replaced the lenses of my own age-fearing society, which has hidden away the treasures of age, it was easy to be grasped, enchanted and trapped by that perspective, so deeply embedded as it is in my own psyche. This cultural self-image was initially expressed by many of the participants. Although many went on to see beauty in ageing faces, and all saw and eloquently expressed beauty in the pictures of ancient landscapes, they placed themselves outside the perceived boundaries of acceptance. Both Joyce and Lillian dehumanised their clay images as being aliens “…from outer space”²⁶⁰. Peggy’s was “a gargoyle”, Norah’s “a monster to be baked and put outside” and Jackie’s looked to her “…like a flippin’ ape or prehistoric man.”²⁶¹

The danger of older people losing their sense of place, despite being vibrant communities has ontological import, as Heidegger’s philosophy reveals.

For Heidegger, the human person is a dasein, literally a “being

²⁵⁹ Max Ernst’s “The Dove in the Wood” portrays the forest as an archetypal place of fear and displacement. Appendix G1.
²⁶⁰ Joyce - Group 1, Lillian - Group 2.
²⁶¹ Peggy, Norah - Group 2, Jackie - Group 3.
there’ - so that placedness is of the essence. It ‘places’ human beings in such a way that it reveals the external bonds of their existence and at the same time the depths of their freedom and reality. (Inge, 2002, 18)

In his essay “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” an older Heidegger developed his idea that place is the house of being by asking

What, then, does *Bauen*, building mean? The Old English and German word for building, *buan*, means to dwell. This signifies: to remain, to stay in place…To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell. (Heidegger, 2001, 144)

To be grounded and whole, a re-imaging of older people as visible images of God, involves a reclamation of their place of dwelling in God’s story, and so too, in society. With the help of theologians Sheldrake, Inge and Brueggemann, who have rediscovered the power of place, I will make the journey further into the forest, enter into the place of ageing, and, attempt to release some long captive images of beauty.

In Cambridge University’s Hulsean lectures, 2000, Sheldrake addresses the long-neglected theme of place in Western thought.

The concept of place refers not only simply to geographical location but to a dialectical relationship between environment and human narrative. Place is space and has the capacity to be remembered and to evoke what is most precious. (Sheldrake, 2001, 1)

He thus encourages me to stand alongside others in the place of ageing and reclaim their hidden treasures. Inge, begins his own rediscovery of the theological significance of place by saying that any “…loss of place [is] dehumanising [for] our existence as embodied beings means that place is as necessary to us as the air we breathe…our human experience is shaped by place,” (Inge, 2003, ix) thus affirming that for a disenfranchised, disembodied, profoundly invisible people, to see age in the
form of beautiful place, as a real delineated space of human experience, is a fundamental necessity. Walter Brueggeman states

There are no meanings apart from roots. And such rootage is a primary concern of Israel and a central promise of God to his people. This sense of place is a primary concern of this God who refused a house and sojourned with his people (2 Samuel 7:5-6) and of the crucified one who “has nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:58) (Brueggemann, 2002, 4)

thus giving biblical perspective to the place of ageing as place where God is. So where am I to find the place of age, how am I to recognise it, how would it be described in ways prevailing culture will understand, and would the describing of it reveal older people as imaging God?
Where are we now?

The old woman and the toad stand out against a confusing pathless external
environment, without horizon, away from civilisation, on the edge of life, reflecting
both the marginalisation of older people per se, and what Sheldrake describes as “… a
crisis of place in Western societies - a sense of rootlessness, dislocation or
displacement.” (Sheldrake, 2001, 2) Along with post-modern intellectual
fragmentation of “…traditional values and symbols” (ibid) leading to the collapse of
“…universal frameworks of meaning” (ibid) comes the social plurality of
globalisation leading to the necessity of new boundaries in many localities.
Meanwhile other boundaries are continually broken down in cyberspace, “…the
displacement of electronic technology…seems to render one’s locality irrelevant.”
(Inge, 2003, 14) To call the World-Wide Web ‘cyberplace’ would reduce it in
cultural terms to the narrow static provinciality of a soap opera.

Remaining in the same place has come to symbolise a lack
of choice, an entrapment, which is the lot of the poor, the
elderly[sic] and people with handicaps (Sheldrake, 2001, 8)

The 2009 Oscar winning film “Up in the Air” about Ray Bingham, a corporate
downsizing expert, living life out of a suitcase and laptop as he flies around the US
firing people, asks, but does not ultimately answer, the question - is this an empty life
or a perfect life? Is this running away or is this freedom? It does, however symbolise
the heights and depths that a disconnected, perpetually moving culture has travelled,
since it was commented upon, pre-internet, by Anne Buttimer thirty years earlier.

The skyscrapers, airports, freeways and other stereotypical
components of modern landscapes, are they not sacred
symbols of a civilisation that has deified reach and derided
home? (Buttimer in Inge, 2003, 17)

Human Experience of Space and Place. Croom Helm, 174.
A complex process of elimination in Western thinking about the locality of place by the more abstract concept of space, lies, according to Inge, at the root of our contemporary loss of place. He narrates the changes of perspectives from Aristotle’s view of place as an unmovable container or vessel which

…holds its contents by surrounding them, so place surrounds the body or group of bodies located within it…Place so defined is determined to be a unique and irreducible part of the material universe. Place, as bounded container, has a dynamic role in enabling a thing to be somewhere, for…without place things would not only fail to be located, they would not even be things. (Inge, 2003, 4)²⁶³

By the fifth century, thoughts about void were more attractive than containers, and lay the groundwork for traditional ‘disembodied’ theology.

At the same time there developed in neo-platonic thought a philosophical conception of ‘spaceless spirit’ which was to be determinative for the West’s understanding of the soul. This has bred the conviction that our local embodied relations are to be transcended and left behind - that place is ultimately of no import. (ibid, 5)

In the sixteenth century Galileo’s telescope discovered that the earth moved around the sun, and according to Brown “…by the time we get to Newton, God’s infinity and the infinity of space are effectively equated, with place simply a way of affirming God’s omnipresence…now merely a point or position rather than one of deep relation.” (Brown, 2004, 187) Thus, science and theology intertwined and informed one another in the apotheosis of space over place until “…it became an axiom of Protestant theology that God’s revelation in Christ broke down elective particularity, not only of race but of place” (Inge, 2003, 29)

²⁶³ Aristotle, Physics, 209b26, 212a20, 208b35. One could argue, in the light of “Up in the air” that our sense of placelessness could be now be defined by a moving vessel which holds things.
It is remarkable, then, that for the participants, a sense of place was so evident. Most of the God-talk among them arose from looking at pictures of landscapes. However they had been inculturated, the connection between God and place had not been lost. In Group 1, Joyce said, “this one with the mountains says to me ‘Jesus rock on which I stand.’ You could hide in this rock, for shelter and protection.” (E7) The shared memories of that group were of places travelled, churches visited and rites of passage. Similarly in Group 2, the dead tree for Lillian “shows how God creates” and Norah said of (E10) “I’m not over religious, but this one looks like everything God has created, and God is looking over it all, the tree there, the mountain there, the waterfall.” Again, the shared conversation flowed into talk of sacred spaces. In Group 3, Chris remarked, “I love watching the trees as I walk up and down the hill, trees for me are God’s spirit”. In Group 4 a dry-stonewall (E12) put Mary “in mind of what man can do with what God’s created” and Jackie “continued to wonder at the thought of God’s creative power that allowed for infinite variety and continuing growth.” The greatest similarity between the older groups and the younger, more analytical control group, and therefore a point of connection between generations, was, to quote Tom, a sense of place as “the beauty of God’s creation.” In our rootless society we still look for our roots, in our fragmentation we seek connection to meaningful place, even as we “deride home” we yearn for it. Breugghemann notes

The sense of being lost, displaced and homeless is pervasive in contemporary culture. The yearning to belong somewhere, to have a home, to be in a safe place, is a deep and moving pursuit. Loss of place and yearning for place are dominant images. (Brueggemann, 2002, 1)

If so, could the place of age, which windows and finds room for God’s beauty, offer a dominant image of home, a place for contemporary culture to come back to, rather than shy away from. Could the old woman who carries the lines of her life on her
face, together with the natural world upon her shoulder, be offering real safety in the forest and true warmth of home rather than its dangerous illusion? Sheldrake’s dynamic description of home is resonant of age as place.

First ‘home’ stands for the fact that we persistently need a location where we can pass through the stages of life and become the person we are potentially. Second we need a place where we can belong to a community. Third we need a place that offers a fruitful relationship with the natural elements, with plants and animals and with the rhythms of the seasons. Finally we need a place that offers access to the sacred…perhaps crucially, relates us to life itself as sacred. (Sheldrake, 2000, 10)²⁶⁴ The resilient identity of age as a culmination of every stage of life, the sense of belonging of age as community have already been unfolded, and, along with the participants’ engagement with nature, are all in the context of offering “…access to the sacred.” (ibid) Placing theological counterpoints to prevailing disembodied thought, as way markers, while journeying along the route of biblical perspective, will help map out age as God’s dwelling place.

²⁶⁴ Sheldrake is inspired by the comments of architect Robert Mugerauer in (1994) Interpretations on Behalf of Place; Environmental Displacements and Alternative Responses. New York State U. Pr., especially chapter 10.
God’s place: a journey of theological re-instatement.

Set up road markers for yourself
make yourself guideposts
consider well the highway
the road by which you went.
Jeremiah 31:21

The horny-scaled toad on the old woman’s shoulder in Somerville’s picture accentuates a reptilian quality in the pattern of her outer garments. Blanket is thrown over coat, coat over coat, scarf over scarf, layering in a continual history of protection yet at the same time suggesting a sloughing off of outer skin, a kairos moment of change and renewal. Buttimer contends

…the record of interest in place synchronises fairly well with periods of relatively abrupt change either within the social or physical environment or in the world of ideas. Late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century Romantic literature on place, for instance, corresponds roughly with a reaction against a Newtonian world view by those who thought it “scandalous” …a scientific grid on Nature” - to reduce beauty, melody and fragrance to the sterile metric of mathematics and physics. (Buttimer in Inge, 2003,18)

The intensely Romantic sense of place expressed by my research participants, suggests a timely offering of the radical rooted particularity of place in a social and physical environment that is suffering sudden global economic collapse and a bleeding of its power and energy into an ocean of unpredictability. As the landmarks of authoritative power and economic stability are swept away, a different, more nuanced cartography presents itself. One that can be traced back beyond modernity and under the scientific grids of modern maps, the “…formal ensemble of abstract places [where] space itself is rationalised as homogenous and divided into identical units” (Inge, 2003, 7) that ensure the “…abolition of difference, automatic

265 Buttimer, 1980, 170. One could argue that contemporary beauty has been similarly sterilized, this time by the graphic grid of the magazine air-brusher.
266 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, Gulf of Mexico, 2010.
complicity with authority and the imposition of standardised patterns of order.” (Jarvis in Inge, 2003, 8) It also travels back, beyond the medieval mapping of the world where physical place was imbued with metaphorical meaning as rite of passage and

…a whole sacred geography held sway. People were not only attached to the places in which they lived but were conditioned to view the world as criss-crossed with holy places into which they made journey, pilgrimage [with] itineraries which told spacial stories…Rather than surveying them as a whole the pilgrim moves through particular spaces, tracing a narrative through space and time by his/her movement and practices… (Inge, 2003, 7)

…to the basis of their journeying, the “…tangible, physical, specific and relational” (Sheldrake, 2000, 6) locus, the land of biblical faith, where place is

… space that has historical meanings, where some things have happened that are now remembered and that provide continuity and identity across generations. [where] Place is space in which important words have been spoken that have established identity, defined vocation and envisaged destiny …a yearning for such a place is a decision to enter history with an identifiable people in an identifiable pilgrimage. (Brueggemann, 2002, 4)

In Brueggemann’s reflection of the land as one of the most important symbols of God’s people, this is a place for roots, identity and meaning. Balanced as it is in the tension between place and placelessness, rooting and uprooting, sojourning and journeying, thus reflecting the liminality of contemporary culture, it also predicates the place of age, which is, in a biblical perspective, as it was for the Israelites “…always a place with Yaweh, a place well-filled with memories of life with him and promise from him and vows to him.”(ibid) Brueggemann offers a series of images, all based on the promise of land to the landless, so resonant with the place of age.

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1. Sojourning.

*Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house.*

*Genesis 12:1*

*I am Yahweh who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans.*

*Genesis 15:7*

Israel is embodied in Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the earliest presentations as sojourners on the way to a land whose name it does not know…They are the people of sojourn…a technical word usually described as “resident alien”…to be in a place, perhaps for some extended time, to live there and take some roots, but always to be an outsider, never belonging, always without rights, title or voice in decisions that matter (*ibid*, 6)

From culture’s viewpoint the old woman with the toad meets me on my journey, I am travelling, she is simply waiting “It’s a sad life when it gets to that stage, just sitting and waiting” said Glenda of a similar portrait of age.\(^{268}\) The place of older people is surely a place of passive sojourn on the edges of life, in doctor’s surgeries, hospitals, bus and post office queues, waiting for carers or visitors, waiting for tea-time, waiting for death. Joyce and Lillian expressed a fundamental truth when they described themselves as aliens.

However, from a biblical perspective, to sojourn is part of a dynamic journey of promise. The theme of movement and journey was evident within the research groups, in response to landscape. The attraction of flowing water,\(^{269}\) walking and rock climbing, travelling abroad,\(^{270}\) moving house,\(^{271}\) walking on beaches,\(^{272}\) the freedom of open landscapes\(^{273}\) and waking up to spring\(^{274}\) all express the above. The resilient

\(^{268}\) Group 1.

\(^{269}\) Audrey, Group 1.

\(^{270}\) Glenda, Group 1, Maurice, Group 3.

\(^{271}\) Norah, Group 2.

\(^{272}\) Maureen, Group 2.

\(^{273}\) Beryl, Group 3.

\(^{274}\) Joan, Group 4.
tree, as viewed by Lillian and Karen\textsuperscript{275} and already described within the context of hope within suffering, here casts the shade of God’s promise to Abraham at the very point of hopelessness.\textsuperscript{276} God’s promise of fruitfulness in Genesis 17:2 is a contrast “sharply drawn” (\textit{ibid}, 21) with the age of Abraham and Sarah who are “too old” for procreation, “barren” and “as good as dead”\textsuperscript{277}

This is new, new history. The rootless one is given land; history of banishment is displaced by the history of promise against all circumstantial evidence (\textit{ibid})

The place of age is not what it seems. The place, where every form and line shapes ending and decay, from the biblical perspective of God’s promise, is the very place of potential and renewal, and to sojourn there is to accept the paradox, with all the strength that implies. Regarding the story of Abraham, Brueggemann says

The Bible considers at length that people without land have the resources and stamina to live toward a land they do not possess. (\textit{ibid}, 8)

In this post-modern time of “…perpetual pilgrimage…when we experience dissatisfaction with final definitions or completed places and are driven ever onwards in a movement of perpetual departure” (de Certeau in Sheldrake, 2000, 2,3)\textsuperscript{278} age does not offer yet another completed place to reject. Rather it offers a point of departure with a direction and resources for peregrination. Perhaps, back in the picture, the woman and I are passing \textit{en route}. With her many coats and hats, suggesting many bags just out of view, her eyes reflect a light ahead. She has set out on a journey and the faceless forest is behind her. The place of ageing is now one of purposeful, perpetual departure into the real unknown, and bids me turn away from my own fears to follow her.

\textsuperscript{275} Groups 2 and 5.
\textsuperscript{276} Genesis 18:1.
\textsuperscript{277} Hebrews 11:11.
\textsuperscript{278} de Certeau, M. (1992) \textit{The Mystic Fable}. Chicago U. Pr., 299.
2. Wilderness.

*Why no! I never thought other than*
*That God is that great absence*
*In our lives, the empty silence*
*Within, the place where we go*
*Seeking, not in hope to*
*Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices*
*In our knowledge, the darkness*
*between the stars...*


In the picture, while the old woman’s mouth remains firmly closed, her eyes are expressive of the way forward, but their focus is diffuse and mysterious, her gaze hard to maintain, her expression unreadable. The toad looks enquiringly at her, but she will not tell where she is going. The faint delineation of a hill in the pathless forest might offer more direction, but to accompany age into *terra incognita* will surely mean a loss of bearings. During the research, the dominant narratives of broken bones, illness and loss underlined the contingency and fragility of age. Norah described a mountain wilderness as “scary, like the rocks are going to disintegrate” and for Mary and Joan’s a desert landscape connected directly with ‘old’

Mary: this looks bleak and very old, what is left of something
Joan: it makes you think of age (Group 4, E17)

The place of age as tractless wilderness, both in the eyes of society and the suffering experiences of older people themselves, finds its biblical counterpart in the Israelite’s desert wanderings of Exodus.

Wilderness is not simply an in-between place that makes the journey longer. It is not simply a sandy place demanding more stamina. It is space far away from ordered land. It is Israel’s historical entry into the area of chaos that, like the darkness before creation is “formless and void” and without a hovering wind...Wilderness is formless and therefore lifeless...To be in the wilderness is landlessness par excellence, being not merely

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279 Group 2.
a resident alien but in a context hostile and destructive.
(Brueggemann, 2002, 27)

Yet here too, at the very point of hopelessness and lostness, in the barren interstices between slavery and the Promised Land, God provides sustenance in the form of manna directly from heaven. The land of nothingness becomes God’s land of plenty. It is in the wilderness where “…in flashes of lightening on red granite, Moses watches for God in the cleft of the rock, his mind stripped of images and his tongue rendered mute” (Lane in Inge, 2003, 38)\(^{280}\) and the glory of God appears in a cloud\(^{281}\) His glory is known, his presence discerned, and his sovereignty acknowledged in this capacity to transform the situation from emptiness to satiation, from death to life, from hunger to bread and meat. Yahweh is the transformer of situations. The surprise is that landlessness can become nourishing. (ibid, 31)

Brueggemann gives special weight to the wilderness encounter.

Is this what God finally wills for his people? Is wilderness an in-between moment without him? Or is wilderness a place which he prefers for his peculiar presence because of his peculiar character? Could it be that he is a god who most desires the interactions of the wilderness…Wilderness and Yahweh belong to each other. As Yahweh’s presence transforms wilderness, so wilderness suggests the peculiar mode and parameters of Yahweh’s presence (ibid, 38, 40)

Thus to describe the wasteland that realistically, is so often age, is to describe the glory, presence and sovereignty of God, so challenging prevailing cultural perspectives at the heart of its own displacement and further authenticating older people as imaging the divine. To be lost in the place of age is to find God. In the place of age, there is not only “…comfort in the midst of chaos and the hope that faithfulness [will] allow deliverance” (Inge, 2003, 38) there is also divine encounter. Belden Lane’s description of “…the apophatic tradition of desert spirituality that

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\(^{281}\) Exodus 16.10.
flows” (*ibid*) from the Israelites’ wilderness experience embraces the mystery of God and the particularity of place.

There is an unaccountable solace that fierce landscapes offer to the soul. They heal as well as mirror, the brokenness we find within. Moving apprehensively in to the desert’s emptiness, up the mountain’s height, you discover in wild terrain a metaphor for your deepest fears. (Lane, 1998, 216)

In Joan’s words, “It makes you think of age,” that wilderness through which the traversing will lead to home.

3. Exile.

In Somerville’s picture, there is a proscribed singularity about the old woman. She travels alone with only her outer garments to protect her from the elements, yet there is a feeling that she has put on her own hat, and tied her own scarf. The toad is her only companion, yet it defers to her. Is she totally lonely or powerfully independent, or both? The narratives of most of the participants, even in the midst of community, were lined and fissured by loss of partner and parents. They were all widows/widowers and orphans, their losses exiling them from great swathes of life. Again paradoxically, this exile binds them even closer into God’s narrative. Whereas sojourning and wilderness held the promise, however lost or unknown, of the Promised Land for the Israelites, their exile in Babylon was a loss of everything they had known and experienced, the loss of the land of promise itself. The Book of Lamentations, is a powerful poetic expression of this loss, with a central and resonant image.

The tragic reversal of Israel concerns the end of what had seemed forever. So Israel is presented like a homeless, forsaken widow who has abruptly lost everything and has nowhere to turn for help…Israel has “none to comfort her” (1:2,9,17,21)…“none to help her”(1:7) It is the end of
everything. (Brueggemann, 2002, 125)

Prophetic Scripture uses a common image of age to speak the abandonment of Israel.

Here the place of age reveals an even deeper displacement, where everything is gone.

And yet the hat and scarf, folded, worn and tattered from many puttings on, is put on against the cold, and Israel, like a widow, must cope.

Israel copes in this poetry in the staggering announcement of a new possibility rooted not in Israel but in the promise of Yahweh. In this most helpless circumstance, Israel can hope and imagine a new history, one rooted in the character of God himself. (3:22-24, 31-33)...it is a beginning not rooted in Israel, but in the fidelity of Yahweh who keeps his promises. Israel must trust the land-giver and the land-promiser precisely when there is no land (ibid)

Brueggemann’s tracing of Israel’s Old Testament narrative in terms of place enables an understanding of age as the place where the most profound faith arises from the most profound loss, where, as in sojourn and wilderness, loss is ultimately transformed to gain. Interestingly, in a dialectic linking the marginalisation of older people with the classicalisation of contemporary culture, Breuggemann notes, that even as the close of the Old Testament finds the Israelites back in their own land, they are increasingly exiled by the Hellenisation of their world which “…had created a keen sense of alienation” (ibid,156), the very placeless place where God’s very self will enter.

4. An embodied place.

Master now you are dismissing your servant in peace according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel
Luke 2:29-32
And the Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory:
John 1:14

As I continue to gaze at the picture of the old woman, I find I am transfixed by her hat. It is more than a juxtaposing flash of bright pink arcing across a subdued twilight palette, although this certainly suggests the surprising positivity of promise already discovered in the place of age. The hat triggers a quarter-century memory of my beautiful newborn daughter, premature and wizened prune-vulnerable, protected from the elements by a pink woolly hat. In a moment of memory, there is a powerful meeting of old and new and the snow suddenly speaks “Christmas”.

Brueggemann follows his theme of God’s transformation through place into the New Testament, and, by describing it from the perspective of the Israelite’s apocalyptic hope, leaves us with the transformation of place itself.

This view believed that a breaking of the ages, a turning of the aeons was about to occur. Among other things, those who waited patiently and faithfully would receive the inheritance of the new age, even as those who now held the land according to the norms of the old age would indeed lose it. Thus the Jesus movement is centred on the sharp and radical transformation of the human situation (ibid, 156)

Brueggemann feels that although the idea of the land is spiritualised in the New Testament, it has not been displaced by the person of Jesus Christ, but embodied.

The transformation of God’s promise from land to Incarnation is heralded in a meeting of old and new by Simeon in the temple.282 New creation is not born and does not grow in place of ageing, but actually in the place of ageing.

It is precisely the end of exile, and the inversion of all life for those denied turf, which is recognised in the person and

282 In “Simeon in the Temple” Rembrandt offers a picture of this transformation embodied. The old man holds out the baby whose folded clothes suggest the shape of a many-paged book. The word has become flesh. The onlooker makes up a trinity that now encompasses every age. (My interpretation) Appendix G2.
preaching of Jesus…the re-arranger of the land. Jesus’ ministry is to restore the rejected to their rightful possession. 

(ibid, 162, 163)

In the spirit of such ministry, older people whose place in society has been squashed out into to a quasi-place of unattractive-fading-to-invisible passive waiting, have their own place restored as dynamic, laughing, crying, loving, story-telling community, through which diverse and vital individuals called Peggy, Maureen, Norah, Maurice and the rest, each live and move and have their being. However, even when one is in the place of age, it is hard to hold that thought. In contemporary culture, the rainbow fades in Brueggemann’s picture of Incarnation as embodied land or “the new age of enlandment” (ibid, 165) and dusk falls. The Word made flesh seems to offer a perichoresis-like interconnection between place, body and spirit which could reveal these older people as physical images of God, each one beautiful in their particularity, but the concept of body, like that of place, has had nowhere to lay its head in Western thought. For Brueggemann “…Jesus on the cross is the presentation of the homeless God and is forced out of his land by the work of his people” (ibid, 130)

From a theology of place, Sheldrake states that while “…a religion based on the doctrine of Incarnation would have been consistent in according a fundamental importance to human history and to material existence…there has always been a siren voice that suggests that what is fundamentally important lies in a spiritual and eternal realm on the far side of time and place.” (Sheldrake, 2001, 22) Emphasis upon spirit over body, universal over particular, space over place has resulted in distorted and marginalising values as critiqued by LeFebre.

Western philosophy has betrayed the body; it has actively participated in the great process of metaphorisation that has abandoned the body; and it has denied the body. The living body, being at once ‘subject’ and ‘object’ cannot tolerate such
conceptual division, and consequently philosophical concepts fall into the category of the ‘signs of non-body’ (LeFebre in Inge, 2001, 53) 283

From a feminist theology of the body Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendell writes

From a feminist theology of the body Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendell writes

Here we have a culture which - with massive support of the Christian churches - has constantly repressed the body and excluded or devalued all that is fleshly, bodily, material. In contrast to Eastern cultures and religions, the Western dualism which divided body and spirit, body and soul, has allowed no loving relationship with the body. (Moltmann-Wendell, 1994, xii)

Moltmann-Wendell sees popular culture’s apotheosis of youthful body beautiful as a backlash against this denial, and I have argued that the still inherent devaluation of the body is now projected onto ageing forms to the point of disappearance.

As noted in Methodology, Sheldrake goes back beyond modernity to the medieval philosophy and theology of Scottish Franciscan Duns Scotus in order to find a theological language of particularity that reclaims place and form for unseen and unheard people. Known as the subtle doctor, Duns Scotus offers a complex but crucial understanding of the doctrine of Incarnation as “God’s greatest work… offering a theologically positive view of what is specific and individual, even the smallest of details.” (Sheldrake, 2001, 23) 284

Incarnation is “the highest good in the whole of creation” and “was immediately foreseen from all eternity by God as a good proximate to the end.” By ‘end’ Scotus means God’s purpose for creation. This purpose… is deification or a sharing in God’s own life. God’s life is so fruitful that it constantly and inherently seeks expression in the particularities of the created order… (ibid)

284 “Interpretations of Scotus… have tended to be somewhat inconclusive and uncertain. This may partly explain why his theology has received less attention than that of Thomas Aquinas. However, while acknowledging the need for caution, it is generally agreed these days that Scotus’ thought was expressed most originally in a theology of particularity and individuality.” (Sheldrake, 2001, 23)
Moltmann Wendell also points to eighteenth century Wittenburg theologian Friedrich Christoph Ottinger who similarly “…developed a theology of creation in which he proclaimed ‘embodiment’ as the ‘end of all the works of God.’” (Moltmann-Wendell, 1994, 44)
While more emphasis is put upon the hypostases than in Fiddes’ Trinitarian view, this theology rocks the traditional concept of economic subordination within the Trinity and opens the embrace of God’s abundance for all. In order to incarnate, to give shape and form to a disappeared and homogenised group, every detail becomes important. Just as Group 3’s Audrey found beauty in the near invisible, in the magnified minutiae of lichen on ancient rock, every line and wrinkle, every expression, every story, every stone shaped like a baby’s foot and every grain of coloured sand, every rock that picks up the light, every water reflected cloud is an expression of the abundance generosity of Creator. Duns Scotus’ strong “…desire to locate a place for commonness and uniqueness in the texture of individual substances,” (Williams, 2003, 122) allows us to see the place of age and its inhabitants not only as new metaphors for God’s body but eternally as “in Christ”. Not only as symbols pointing beyond themselves to God

… whereby true beings exist not only in God and everything else is derivative, pointing directly towards true being…[rather that] all things in their very particularity participate directly in the life of the Creator. This is one thing implied by Scotus’s difficult concept of ‘univocity of being’. Because everything participates directly in God, each thing is a uniquely important expression of God’s beauty as a whole. (Sheldrake, 2001, 24)

…but also totally and unequivocally themselves. In post-modernity where there are no longer any absolutes, but where every uttered “absolutely” reveals the yearning, this “…concept of absolute particularity [haecceitas: thisness] as opposed to some greater perfection of what transcends particularity or achieves a certain abstract universality” (ibid) allows each and every one of us a sense of form and home. The

285 Lillian and Maureen, Group 2.
286 Audrey and Maurice, Group 3.
287 “For example, to the category of leaf or place is added an individualizing form, or final perfection, that makes this leaf this or this place this rather than that. Scotus gave the name heaeccitias “thisness” to this individualizing form. Each is perfect in its particularity.” (Sheldrake, 2001, 24)
work of Gerard Manley Hopkins is the poetic expression of Scotus’ epistemology, which resonates completely with my own urge to describe the beauty of older people, from the strong insight of Simeon to the long wisdom of Joan.

*I say more; the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God’s eyes what in God’s eyes he is -
Christ - For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men’s faces
(Gerard Manley Hopkins “As Kingfishers catch fire, Dragonflies draw flame, 1965, 50)²⁸⁸

One could argue that this concept of Incarnation lifts the individual above community, but in the context of Franciscan spirituality it is expressed in terms of cosmic fraternity.²⁸⁹ We all are “in” Christ therefore we all “do” Christ for each other. *Thisness* involves “…a sense of God’s place among the rejected and the garbage of this world…[it] expresses the absolute exclusivity of God that draws all things together within difference.” (Sheldrake, 2001, 29)

In the place of ageing there is always Simeon’s proclamation of divine presence, the embodiment of God’s reconciling promise, “…entering the world of the concrete, specific” (*ibid*) and, so particular, it is small and light enough to be held aloft in the oldest of hands. Through this proclamation, that “…God in Jesus becomes committed to and thus redeems all that humanity is, including the unacceptable and ‘other’, and all places where humans dwell” (*ibid*) there is a reclaiming of age’s own embodied place totally and unequivocally as God’s people, in God’s own image.

²⁸⁸ “For Hopkins…the teaching of Duns Scotus …matched his belief in a sacramental universe…To Scotus’ term ‘thisness’ he gave the name ‘inscape’ by which he meant the absolute selfhood of an object.” (Mayne, 2008, 220)
²⁸⁹ Be praised, my Lord, of those who pardon for Thy love and endure sickness and tribulations, Blessed are they who will endure it in peace, for by Thee, Most High, they shall be crowned. (Saint Francis of Assisi, 1910, Ch CXX)
5. A Sacred Space.

The elderly[*sic*] are a beautiful part of the natural world, after all, what is beauty? Like rivers flowing through the forest each wrinkle defines the infinite quality of life’s textures and experiences. (Judy Somerville, 2008)

I met George when I was going to college and working part-time at a shelter for homeless men…George had one of the most beautiful faces I’ve ever seen…hard to express with words. George’s face was like grainy, grey rock, its features sculpted and etched by wind and rain, pocked and scarred by ice and snow; like an ancient landscape that had experienced fecund, young times of flowers, sudden rifts, slow glacial change. George’s face shone with experience and wisdom of ages. Maybe that’s what they mean, about suddenly seeing the face of Christ. (Paynter, 2007, 9)

We have journeyed long and biblically through the place of ageing and for the old woman in Somerville’s picture there seems tiredness in her resolve. Perhaps it is time to remain still and take in the landscape. The lines of the woman’s face, some deep, some fine, reflect the delicate interlacing of branches of many trees. The curve of her raised eyebrow follows the rise of the hill. Her face’s undulating landscape is the colour of earth and snow. Like the toad, her appearance is so elemental she could merge, camouflaged into her surroundings. It is a place both worldly and other worldly.

Sheldrake believes that Duns Scotus’ concept of heacceitas

… demands that believers become similarly engaged with particularity, with contingent reality, with specific places. By remaining here and there Scotus proclaims, we encounter the face of God (Sheldrake, 2001, 29)

We are challenged to regard the place of age as sacred, as all places are. To enter the place of age is to experience an encounter with the divine, as it brings into focus older people as beautiful embodied images of God. Rather than their beauty becoming
more disembodied and ‘spiritualised’ as their “outer nature is wasting away”\(^\text{290}\) (2 Corinthians 4:16), their inward renewal is reflected in their particularity, not despite it. The concept of “Thisness” imbues age with a sense of embodied place and theologically affirms my instinct to describe the beauty I see in older people in the same way that they, in their generosity of vision, describe the beauty of landscapes and nature. Moltmann-Wendell consolidates the connection, stating that the body “…is at the same time an expression of nature…for human beings the body is the primary way of being in the world.” (Moltmann-Wendell, 1994, 86) Mystic and scientist Teilhard de Chardin, in his meditation “Hymn of the Universe”, also resonates, in his poetic fusion of Christ’s universality and matter’s particularity

Now Lord, through the consecration of the world, the luminosity and fragrance which suffuse the universe take on for me the lineaments of a body and a face - in you…

( Teilhard De Chardin, 1961, 25)

Seventeenth century poet Thomas Traherne asked similarly “…how do we know, but the world is that Body, with the Deity hath assumed to manifest His Beauty, and by which He maketh Himself as visible, as it is possible He should?” (Traherne, 1960, II: 20, 65) If every being is individuated and of itself, I am able to describe a suffering older person as having the resilience of trees, or the mountainous achievement of long life as humbling and awesome, or equate the flexibility of memory and imagination with a sparkling river’s flow, without losing person or matter in the metaphor. I had to wait until the youngest group to experience this mystical connection with body and landscape. Rachel’s statement “the desert to me looks like the woman you chose, stereotypical beauty” even while offered as a critique of classically youthful beauty, reveals a sense of place, thus potentially the perspective and the language to see and engage with the embodied beauty of ages not yet experienced.

\(^{290}\) 2 Corinthians 4:16.
However, none of the older participants connected their own selves with the beauty either of the portraits or the landscapes they were shown. This may be because, influenced by culture that deems them invisible, they have learnt not see themselves in terms of beauty. It may be that they have sloughed off the aesthetic pressures of youth, and so are unconscious of their own attractiveness (an unselfconsciousness that adds to the beauty), and it may be that theirs is a particular beauty that becomes more embodied with age. This is partly because “… unfortunately we only learn we are bodies - painfully and in a limited way - in boundary situations in chronic illnesses, in handicaps which seem final, in old age when there are no longer any fountains to promise eternal youth.” (Moltmann-Wendell, 1994, 2) However, Maureen, who could sit “in the woods on a lovely big seat, with all the rabbits running round…and just be content and relax” reminds us that “…being a body can also be the experience of well-being, of being alive, a conscious experience of the rhythms of the body, the happy feelings of being at one with nature, with trees, grass, cats.” (ibid) Older people, often because of bodily limitations, and just as often because of other freedoms, develop the capacity to be still, and so to reflect more and more the natural landscape. It is beauty that, without fading, becomes camouflaged, as they become part of their surroundings. In Simone de Beauvoir’s “Old Age” John Cowper Powys is quoted

… in old age people finally come to practice that ‘passive activity by which our human organism merges with the inanimate…There is an inexpressible relationship between an old man warming himself in the sun and a piece of flint being warmed in the sun’ (De Beauvoir, 1977, 541)

It is an unquantifiable beauty, thus transcending traditional canons of perfection.

Perhaps, along with the ineffable relationship between creature and creation, the

291 Group 2, (E1) and (E3)
292 Appendix G3.
experience of age as embodied places of exile or wilderness where loss and nothingness are the very points of gain and identity, because God’s glory and promise is revealed at the very point of hopelessness, means that age’s peculiar “thisness” will also be paradoxically its “otherness”. The beauty of the place of age, even in its particularity, will embody the invisible because, in the widest meaning of the word, the beauty of age is sacramental.  

The concept of place as sacred is drawn from Celtic spirituality where “…nature is like a second revelation, a ‘book’ to be ‘read’ alongside the scriptures.” (Sheldrake, 1995, 76)

\[\text{Columbanus (c.543-615)}\]

“…the great Celtic monastic founder [is recorded as saying] “Seek no further concerning God; for those who wish to know the great deep must first review the natural world…then a man[\textit{sic}] wishes to know the deepest ocean of divine knowledge, let him first scan the visible sea.” (\textit{ibid, 61,76})

Also, from St Francis who “…regularly discerned wonder in what others viewed with scorn” (Lane, 1988, 8) and from Benedictine spirituality where “…material things are sacramenta, symbols that reveal the goodness and beauty of the creator” (Inge, 2003, 61)

… the language of the sacrament tells us of the wonders that lie beyond the finite, the material, but can only be reached through it. Sacramentality is not simply an affirmation of the world as it is but of the fact that Christ is in the world to unite the broken fragments of life by making the material a vehicle for the spiritual…the religious experience understood sacramentally links the dualities under which the one world keeps appearing. Christ himself is the reintegration of God’s original creation and in Christ God has restored the

\[\text{Sacrament is a word borrowed from the Ancient Greek implying mystery “…as its nearest Greek equivalent in the New Testament world, \textit{musterion} because the Eucharist and baptism were viewed as the Church’s supreme mysteries or ‘secrets’…” (Brown, 2004, 25) and has had both wide and narrow meanings throughout the development of Christianity. “The recognition that Christians are called to see Christ has led to yet further extension of sacrament to individual human beings…” (Inge, 2003, 61)}\]

\[\text{Walker, G.S.M. (ed.) (1970) \textit{Sancti Columbani Opera}. Sermon 1, 63.}\]
sacramental nature of the universe (Inge, 2003, 76)

We can only reach the infinite through the finite. “Spirit can only speak through matter” (Mayne, 2008, 71) To recognise older people as imaging God we have to see them as embodied. Then the visible, embodied beauty of age reflects, even in its hiddenness “…a sacramental view [that] affirms that [God’s uniting of the fragmentation of life] is, even now being achieved and this is what we are bidden to see glimpses of all around us in the created world in moments of transfiguration.” (Inge, 2003,76) So to enter and travel through the place of ageing is to enter and travel through a place of individuation and community, of “…relationship with the natural elements…[and] access to the sacred” (Sheldrake, 2000, 10) where to perceive the beauty of older people will always be an experience of “…lifting of the veil at the horizon of the known” (Mayne, 2008, 43) and as such, we will surely be surprised by the wonder of touching briefly that which we have yearned for.

With beauty all around me
May I walk
In old age wandering on a trail of beauty lively
May I walk
In old age wandering on a trail of beauty
living again
may I walk,
It is finished in beauty
It is finished in beauty
Conclusion: The important things are there

But over the years of living with people
Who have been crushed or put aside
I have discovered something new.
They have led me gently
Into the depths of my own heart
filled, as it is with light and darkness.
They have led me into the mystery of Jesus
and of his message
and into the secret of humanity and its history.
They have shown me the light shining in the darkness...
They have begun to reveal to me with greater clarity
God’s unfolding plan for humanity
(Vanier, 1988, 16)

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive at where we started
And know the place for the first time
(T. S. Eliot. Little Gidding V, 1963, 222)

Back in the coffee morning, many, many coffee mornings later, I still enter the unknown, subconsciously looking for something familiar. However, since my journey in search of forms that express older people as beautiful images of God, and so honour them as part of Christ’s Body, I hope I am a little quicker to recognise my own ‘far country’. I no longer firstly search narcissistically for the ‘symmetrical’ the ‘perfect’, rather I have discovered that the very point of connection from which I can begin to communicate is ageing itself. Ageing which is no longer on the distorted but focussed and inflexible continuum of fearful - to unattractive - to invisible, as traced through historical, cultural and ecclesial analysis, but rather on a weaving, winding, surprising journey moving authentically closer, in every direction, at every moment, to others and to myself, all as images of God. A journey where age has been de-stigmatised, the beauty of older people unmasked and a few scales pulled from my

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295 Joan, talking of her model as the image of God, Group 4.
296 A quotation by C.S. Lewis in my Introduction.
own eyes along the way. For the canon of beauty informing my original perceptions, has now, through my discoveries, transformed.

Through the shared and immediate experience of clay-play, listening to older people talking about beauty and being drawn into their previously unheard narratives, “...beyond easy narrative” (Sheldrake, 2000, 21) I found an alluring beauty the heart-connected eye could not disregard.

beauty n. 1 = attractiveness, a-symmetry, variety, odd and even, undulating, surprising, versatile, kaleidoscopic, many-hued, multi-dimensional, unquantifiable, immeasurable, subverting, diverse, authentic.

Through a time of gazing and reflection upon those experiences, hopefully wide, deep and long enough to honour the contemplative breadth and depth and pace of older people, I found a unique sense of humour, of suffering, of community, of place.297 A beauty so accessible the heart-connected eye could see itself included.

beauty n. 2 = beyond goddess to earth, reality, body, tangible, visible, rooted, particular, natural, un-self-conscious, laughter, playfulness, experience, pain, interested, empathic, nurturing, welcome, story, remembrance, imagination, joy.

Each reflection involved a search for theological forms that would bring not only older people in from the contemporary diaspora along with the displaced concepts of laughter, suffering, community and place, but also, bring us life in all its fullness in the midst of our own marginalising anxiety and fear.

297 Plato’s description of the body in terms of four elements or humours, in Timaeus, and my research shaping into four descriptive parts, not only appeals to my sense of aesthetic but also resonates with the hope that neo-classical contemporary culture can break the codes as well as being bound by them.
Older people can become a reservoir of values to transmit to new generations. Experience has shown that whenever older people are valued, included and enabled to participate, the community is a richer one. (Merchant, 2008, 76)

For, in regarding older people I experienced, face-on, the Body of Christ.

beauty n. 3 = blessing, benefit, good thing, whole, liberating, life-giving, awesome, transforming, reconciling, healing, sacrament, doxology, epiphany, resurrection community, perichoresis, identity, home.

An ever-increasingly revelatory uncovering of a burning-bush-way, in a time of a rapidly ageing demographic, feared as a time of ashes, for us to hear and recognise God saying, “I AM WHO I AM”.298

I began with my own perceptions of older people, within that demographic dynamic, at a time when my own ageing, and a western church concerned with its own ageing, was revealing itself as a challenge. Shaped by a classical mould and determined to subvert it, I decided to adopt eurythmy, a different way of seeing and thus sculpting theologically a new, real and sustainable form of beauty that would fit the content of ‘old’. I was hoping at least to adapt the proportions I found to the requirements of sight. Moltmann-Wendel states “There is no openness to revelation without risk, but it is a condition of growth into maturity that we take that risk…” (Moltmann-Wendell, 2006, 86) And through experiencing the revelation of older people, my research process was, while “…cast into the crucible of [my] imagination” (Hegel, 1820-29, II,1b), transformed beyond my own thought and imagining, into an act of love. Mayne suggests “…it is in the discovery of other persons…in the recognition of their uniqueness by seeing them with love, that we become aware of God as the mystery in

298 Exodus 3:14.
and between us, holding us and uniting us at the very centre of our being.” (Mayne, 2008, 237) Buber is resonant in his provision of a *kairos* context for this act of love.

There is a time of maturing, when the true element of the human spirit, suppressed and buried, comes to hidden readiness so urgent and so tense that it awaits only a touch from Him who touches in order to burst forth. The revelation that then makes its appearance seizes in the totality of its constitution the whole elemental stuff that is thus prepared, melts it down and produces it in a form that is a new form of God in the world (Buber, 1958, 116,117)

The new form here is a breaking flooding fire of beauty so immense and multifarious, distinct and mysterious, so “charged with love…with God” (Manley Hopkins in Mayne, 2008 222) and God’s “…desire for all-inclusive beauty [which] moves the world to greater and greater harmonies” (Harteshorne in Fiddes, 1988, 44) it is a form that can never ever be bound by canons or rules, only searched for in the dark, and at the edges, tentatively pointed out in awe and wonder, knelt before…and experienced.

*Temple’s Simeon*

*opens mouth*

*old wine flowing from old skins*

*speaking*

*God’s body, particularly beautiful*

*‘not so old man’*

*hat-tipping playful begins to laugh, woman by the Catskills window*

*flashing earring’s fire*

*stirs again to sing, wurlizer women squeeze-up making room for the ride, and old woman and toad, turning to dance along well-waited corridors*

*rainbow-arched eyebrow raised in invitation saying silently*

*“follow me.”*

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Appendix A. Skin Deep:

A1: Goddess Athena: First century BC marble copy of Phidias’ fifth century BCE original which stood on the Acropolis.

A2: Venus de Milo. (Roman Equivalent of Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty) Alexandros of Antioch, 130-100 BCE, the Louvre, Paris.

A4: Venus Cnidia. Roman Copy of a state by Praxitiles 375-330 BC Rome, Museo Romano Nazionale and Hermes with Young Dionysus, Roman copy of a statue by Praxitiles, 370-330 BC, Rome, Museo Roman
A5: Reconstruction of the East Front of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia. (Browning, 1985, 140)

A6: Kore. Sixth century BCE, Athens, National Archaeological Museum (Eco, 1994, 73)

A9: “The Good Shepherd, a common metaphor for Christ on early Christian sarcophagi, looks back to the ancient image of the calf bearer. Greek figure in Athens 6C BCE and its Christian equivalent 360 in Rome” (Browning, 1985, 183)

A10: The Raising of Lazarus. Giotto de Bondone, 1267-1337, fresco from the Arena Chapel in Padua.


A17: Electric Lamp. Philippe Wolfer, c1901, from “La Fee(accent) Paon” (Eco, 1994, 368)

A19 Pioneer Spacecraft: 1972
Appendix B. Age shallow.

B1: Stone. McKie, R. Living with Britain’s Time Bomb.

B2: Forever Young

May God bless and keep you always
May your wishes all come true
May you always do for others
and let others do for you
May you build a ladder to the stars
And climb on every rung
And may you stay, forever young…

May you grow up to be righteous
May you grow up to be true
May you always know the truth
And see the light that’s surrounding you
May you always be courageous
Stand upright and be strong
May you stay forever young…

May your hands always be busy
And your feet always be swift
May you have a strong foundation
When the winds of changes shift
May your heart always be joyful
And your song may it be sung
And may you stay
Forever young

Bob Dylan, Forever Young.
Available from:
[Accessed 16 November 2010]
B3: La Beau Narciss (Beautiful Narcissus) Honore Daimier, Histoire Ancienne 1842.

The bodies of grownups come with stretchmarks and scars, faces that have been lived in, relaxed breasts and bellies, backs that give trouble, and well-worn feet: flesh that is particular, and obviously mortal. They also come with bruises on their hear, wounds they can’t forget, and each of them a company of lovers in their soul who will not return and cannot be erased. And yet I think there is a flood of beauty beyond the smoothness of youth; and my heart aches for that grace of longing that flows through bodies no longer straining to be innocent, but yearning for redemption.

Appendix C: The Body distorted

C1 Rembrandt van Rijn: Adam and Eve. 1638. Tel Aviv Museum of Art.
Appendix D: Research Project: Portraits


Appendix E: Research Project: Landscapes


Appendix F: The Threat of the Smile

F1. Old Folks Laugh

They have spent their content of simpering, holding their lips this and that way, winding the lines between their brows. Old folks allow their bellies to jiggle like slow tambourines. The hollers rise up and spill over any way they want. When old folks laugh, they free the world. They turn slowly, slyly knowing the best and the worst of remembering. Saliva glistens in the corners of their mouths, their heads wobble on brittle necks, but their laps are filled with memories. When old folks laugh, the consider the promise of dear painless death, and generously forgive life for happening to them.

Dr Maya Angelou

Appendix G: The Place of Age:
G1. Max Ernst: Dove in the Forest. Tate Gallery. London

This morning he leaned his arms on the bedroom windowsill, looking out into the garden. As well as marvelling that he had time to be still and I had time to watch him being still, I was arrested by the sight of his lower arms – how the muscles had developed since he had gardened more and driven less.

As his hands rested on the planed wood of the windowsill, the garden light traced the tree-like structures of his arms. No longer having to control his surroundings, he is becoming one with creation – he is ageing beautifully.
All names have been used with the permission of the research participants.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.\textsuperscript{300}

\textsuperscript{300} Gerard Manley Hopkins. Pied Beauty in Roberts, 1965,47