

STAYING AWAKE AT THE WHEEL



I cannot remember being small.

Obviously, I was. Probably for more than a few years. At some point I may even have been considered big for my age. I wish I could ask my mum. She would have known. Dad remembers me as tall and, in my words rather than his, a bit fat.

Being big, at least in the physical sense, can be useful. In my school community, it helped. Basketball was easier than it might otherwise have been. Getting a role as an adult in the school play was not too difficult. Being goalkeeper, centre half or centre forward in the school football team was almost a given.

But it is not that kind of big, or its opposite, small, that I have been thinking about.

I am more interested in the size of the world we live in.

Not the actual world. That remains as large, complicated, frustrating and beautiful as it ever was. I mean the world we choose to move through. The world made up of the places we go, the people we meet, the journeys we are prepared to make, the conversations we have, and the experiences we are still willing to say yes to.

From quite a young age, my world felt open. I did not enjoy school, but geography wasn't so bad. I could imagine the high mountains of the Alps, the Himalayas and the Andes. I could read about the great rivers of the Amazon and North East Africa, and how they eventually found their way to vast seas.

At first, the edges of my own world were not very far away. Leyland, the town I lived in, was my world. A trip to my birth town of Southport or Manchester felt like something significant. New people, new places and a late night, especially during the school week, carried a certain excitement.

Sport helped make my world bigger. A football, basketball or golf match in another town was something to look forward to. There was a quiet thrill in getting on a bus to travel to another club, to play against people I did not know, in a place I had not been before.

Later, from my late teens onwards, I travelled to many corners of the world. I am not especially proud to say that getting on a plane once felt almost like getting on a train or bus for the daily commute.

But I was lucky. Very lucky.

I met people from many cultures. I heard their music, ate their food, watched their traditions and tried, not always successfully, to understand their way of seeing the world. I saw first hand how education, sport, politics, family and society vary from country to country.

I have lived a life that has, so far, allowed me to look outwards.

I would like to keep it that way.

Post Covid 19

Since Covid, I have travelled less. Still too much, perhaps, but less than before. Over time, I have noticed something. Almost everyone I first met in countries far and wide has aged or is no longer with us. I know, I probably should have noticed this earlier. But when there are bigger gaps between seeing friends and colleagues, the changes become much easier to spot.

Some people have aged better than others. I know former athletes who no longer take part in the sport they once loved. I have seen others come to terms with the fact that they are simply not as good at whatever they did as they once were. I have chatted with incredibly bright people who are no longer in the roles they once occupied.

It is, of course, inevitable. But that does not make it easy.

It takes a certain grace to accept that life is changing. But change does not always mean decline. When one door closes, another opens, so the saying goes. Like most sayings, it can sound a little too neat. But there is truth in it. Many doors do open with a simple push.

My Dad self-published a book when he was 86. A friend, after years of work and family life, found time to explore a long-held interest and, after training properly, opened the door to a new career.

These examples matter to me because they are not dramatic reinventions. They are quieter than that. They are reminders that later life does not have to be only about narrowing choices.

I once saw a meme about four men deciding where to celebrate their 21st birthday. They chose the place with the cheapest beer, the loudest music and the best-looking crowd. The meme moved through their 40th and 60th birthdays. By the time of their 80th birthday, the deciding factors were ease of parking, an early bird menu, no loud music and somewhere close to home.

I laughed.

Then I realised I was laughing because there was truth in it.

Somewhere along the way, our world can begin to shrink.

Not dramatically. Not all at once. It happens quietly.

A journey that once seemed easy begins to feel like quite a lot of effort. Driving a couple of hours to attend an event, take a course, meet a friend or try a restaurant becomes a bigger decision than it used to be. The unfamiliar starts to carry more weight. The regular starts to feel safer.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with knowing what we like.

In fact, there is wisdom in it. As we get older, we become better at recognising what gives us pleasure, what drains us and what is no longer worth our time. That can be one of the gifts of age. We stop wasting energy on things that do not matter to us.

But There Is Also A Risk

The risk is that we begin to miss opportunities before we have properly understood them. We say no, not because something is wrong for us, but because it sits just outside the pattern of life we have created.

We may convince ourselves that we are making good choices, when in fact we are simply making familiar ones.

I have seen this in people I like and respect. People who were once decisive can become hesitant. People who once seemed open to almost anything can begin to protect what they already know.

Perhaps we all need to be careful here.

In golf terms, we start to play the safe shot rather than the right shot.

We play the same course more often. We play with the same people. We choose the same clubs on the same holes. We repeat the same routines, not always because they are best, but because they are known.

Players who once had a wide armoury of shots can gradually become dependent on one stock shot. Then something important happens. The shot we do not use begins to disappear.

Life can be like that too.

We go to the same places, at the same times, with the same people, and have many of the same conversations. There is comfort in that, and comfort is not a bad thing. A calm life is not a lesser life.

But comfort can become a very polite form of limitation.

It does not announce itself as fear. It sounds more reasonable than that. It says, "It is too far." It says, "I probably will not enjoy it." It says, "I do not really need to go." It says, "Maybe another time."

And often, another time never comes.

I am conscious that I am writing this from where I am now. At the time of writing, I have never been 90. I have never been 80. I have never even been 70. Perhaps by then I will feel differently.

I hope not.

I hope that by then I will still be accepting things that make me stretch. I hope I will still be curious. I hope I will still be reaching for the edges. I certainly intend to.

Of course, some opportunities are age-related. Some are a better fit for younger people. Others may be more suited to those with a few miles in the tank. We all have preferences, and those preferences change over time.

That is fine.

The point is not to say yes to everything. That would be exhausting and probably foolish. The point is to notice why we are saying no.

Are we saying no because something is wrong for us?

Or are we saying no because it is unfamiliar?

I hope I can still try to play the right shot in golf, rather than only the shot I know I can play. I hope I will say yes more often than I say no. I hope I can think decisions through properly and decide what is the right thing to do, rather than simply leaning on the default answer.

I am not suggesting that we should pretend to be younger than we are. There is nothing attractive about ignoring the truth of age, energy, responsibility or experience.

The question is different.

How do we continue to make our world bigger without pretending we are twenty years younger? How do we push ourselves without making life feel forced? How do we remain curious while also accepting that we may genuinely want a calmer life?

Perhaps the answer is not to abandon routine, but to interrupt it.

Not every day. Not through some dramatic reinvention of who we are. But often enough to remind ourselves that the world is still larger than the habits we have built around it.

A different route to work.

A conversation with someone younger.

A question we would not normally ask.

A book outside our usual interests.

A place passed many times but never entered.

A dinner that takes a little more effort.

A yes, when no would have been easier.

I am conscious of the value this brings to my life. I spend time with people who challenge me. I value my time with younger people, not because they are automatically right, but because they often see different things. Their references are different. Their impatience is different. Their view of what is possible has not yet been narrowed by disappointments, compromises or routines.

At first, that can be uncomfortable.

I am glad it is.

Not all discomfort is a warning. Sometimes it is simply the feeling of the world getting a little larger again.

I am not writing this as someone who has solved it. I am writing it because I can feel the temptation myself.

The easy no.

The familiar road.

The safe conversation.

The comfortable routine.

None of these things are wrong. In fact, they may be exactly what we need at certain points in life. But I also know that if I am not careful, I can fall asleep at the wheel of my own life. Not through laziness. Not through lack of interest. But through the quiet pull of what is familiar, easy and already known.

That, I think, is the risk.

The world does not shrink because we age. It shrinks when we stop reaching for the edges of it.

Perhaps one useful task, as we get older, is to remain available.

Available to people.

Available to ideas.

Available to surprise.

Available to the possibility that there is still more to see, more to learn, more to enjoy and more to understand.

Because once our conversations become too safe, our journeys too short, our routines too fixed and our circles too small, we may not immediately notice what has been lost.

But something has.

It is part of what made us who we are in the first place. Our willingness to embrace new experiences. Our willingness to be changed, even slightly, by people, places and ideas we did not already know.

The challenge, then, is not to chase youth.

It is not to be busy for the sake of being busy.

It is to stay awake.

To keep enlarging our world, gently and deliberately, one small act of curiosity at a time.

Tony Bennett

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