

Dr Juliet Batten

Excerpt from 'Pathways to Spirited Ageing' – for Selwyn Foundation conference, August 28, 2014

How do you maintain a positive attitude towards the older people you care for? That question preoccupied me when I took a job as a nurse-aid in a private hospital for the elderly, 50 years ago. After completing my BA I was saving money to go overseas with my husband– what's now called a 'gap' year.

Working in that place as a nurse aid was shocking for me, as a young woman of twenty-one. By the time I embarked on the ship that took me to Europe, I pushed this experience firmly behind me, and never wanted to think about it again.

But I kept a diary during that time, in my little Kingfisher Exercise Book, and this month I found it, and there on yellowed lined paper in black ink from a fountain pen I'd written these words:

'The work is tiring and rather distressing, as it is not a hospital in which anyone ever gets better. They just go into a steady, painful, slow decline and die, for they are all old people, mainly over 70 at least. In addition to this, in many of them the mind is every bit as feeble as the body, and they get treated like little children. . . .

It's not so much the physical distastefulness of the job that I mind (that one soon gets used to) as the terrible depression I suffer of seeing these people caught in a world of their own, which is like a prison, shutting them in from the outside world. One can find no entry into their world, no common language, and this is what I can never get used to without hardening myself to it, which is no solution at all. These people haunt me after I arrive home, and will no doubt continue to haunt me for a long time after I leave the job. I would rather die at 60 than continue to 100 in that state.'

In Dr. Chris Perkins's book on Dementia, she cites a British survey that showed that depression is an occupational hazard of the caring profession in this sector.

(Chris Perkins, *Dementia: What you need to know*. Random House, Auckland, 2013, p. 136: UK survey shows 97% of carers suffered some form of emotional difficulty: stress, tiredness, depression or loneliness.)

How do keep your spirit alive when caring for the elderly? That was the question I couldn't answer at 21.

But there were some things that younger Juliet, newly married, straight out of university, didn't know.

Fast forward fifty one years to another private hospital. Last week I walked into a hospital for old people, which I visit regularly. I found my oldest client, who is 92, gazing blankly into space, to all outer appearances just like those old people in Rangimarie hospital. But I left in a very different state of mind. I left feeling heart-open, inspired, and glad. Back in 1963 I wrote that 'one can find no entry

into their world.' Now I know there are entry points, and finding an entry, however subtle, or however dramatic, brings about the greatest joy.

What do you think made the difference? Yes, I know I had fifty years more life experience, but more specifically, I learned to practise the principles of spirited ageing.

Spirited ageing is about staying vital and alive on the inside, no matter what is happening in your body. It's about having access to another energy source than the physical. Spirited ageing is about practising the art of renewal.

I began to learn these principles in my 50s when going through late midlife and researching for my book *Growing into Wisdom*. I learned more in my sixties when I encountered health problems. Thirty years of meditation and spiritual practice gave given me a daily connection with spirit. In recent years, I learned more when undertaking research for my book *Spirited Ageing*, and conducting interviews with over twenty spirited elders.

Then I 'bottled' those principles in the ten chapters of the book to make them available to everyone, so that you too can start practising spirited ageing in your 50s, 60s and beyond, and find faith in your own ageing process and also that of others.

Spirited Ageing: cultivating the art of renewal is available from www.julietbatten.co.nz or independent booksellers.