

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Old age and shipwrecks

I went searching for a memorable quote some years ago when I became interested in old age. The most compelling metaphor I could find surprised me: "Old age is a shipwreck." On looking for the author, I was further surprised to find that it was attributed to French president, Charles de Gaulle.

Of course, there are oodles of witticisms regarding old age. These range from buoyant observations regarding what a fine and carefree time it can be, thoughts on forgetfulness and sage reminders to attend to business when time is running short. Nevertheless, De Gaulle's shipwreck thing remains my favorite, perhaps because it is so cryptic, yet so relatable.

Though I thought the French president must have said it regarding the decrepitude and misery that can accompany advanced age, I was wrong: de Gaulle, I discovered, had made the statement as part of a critique of Marshal Philippe Petain, who had collaborated with the Nazis to head-up the Vichy government during World War II. I still liked it but wondered why I'd developed a fondness for a handful of words that might best be described as a downer, and not for any of the other quotes that cast life more optimistically, more rosily.

Why indeed, I wondered, couldn't life be more like one of the Norman Rockwell prints that I'd seen in now defunct magazines? The likely reason – if there is a reason – pertains to my experiences as a physician, and the suffering I've seen, with lives tragically interrupted or compromised in irreparable ways. This was not confined to

oldsters, I realized, for fate and suffering are equal opportunity employers, as it were. No one misses out on tragedy, but the aged seem especially vulnerable.

What was it that Zorba the Greek exclaimed? "Life is problems!"



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Delaying, avoiding, or minimizing life's jeopardy may be the best we can do. The shipwreck metaphor may still be instructive if we consider ourselves as ships or seagoing craft, but aim to keep ourselves as seaworthy as possible, aiming for gentler landings when storms come. Accordingly, we are enjoined to stay strong, to live sensibly active lives. We will likely have to change: strength training and balance exercises, for example, pay dividends as we age. We will have to desist from harmful activities: smoking and alcohol are poisonous and should be regarded accordingly.

Some habits work to keep us well, and the ancients were right to emphasize the benefit and repair possible when we attend to our sleep.

We may go further with our ship analogy. Seagoing craft of any complexity must attend to navigation, and we, too, must be capable of charting reasonable courses. Just as ships rely on navigation systems, we have our own equipment – our brains or noggins, where the truism holds: Use it or lose it. We remain responsible for the inputs we provide our own central processing units, with information that is pertinent, current and appropriately challenging. As with all information processing, overload is possible. Best perhaps to make our own hardware and software work hard, but not too hard, so that there is some redundancy left to help in challenging circumstances.

Not everything depends on intellectual horsepower. We are also emotional/social animals and our wellbeing depends on a number of evolutionary developments that are unique to humans. These can be considered as similar to the supports or guard rails or the rigging on a ship and can help keep us safe on our travels. Strong relationships, capable emotional regulation and appropriate social behaviour all act as stabilizers. One might even say they keep us on an even keel.

But even if we are sturdy vessels, well outfitted and resilient in the face of bad weather, we will remain challenged, finally, with our own inevitable morbidity and mortality. As

circumstances change, we will be called upon to meet and accept our devolution. Key is our acceptance – call it psychological adaptation – and using our ship metaphor, our adaptation can lighten the loads we carry. It is troubling to realize that the end of our lives consists of letting go of our possessions and indeed everything else.

But it is necessary.

Consider the suffering we inflict upon ourselves demanding too much from an old body. Consider the relief that is possible when we surrender obsolete identities.

I saw a small example of success at letting go involving a surgeon a year or so ago. Horace, let's call him, had been an accomplished orthoped, with a busy practice and a stellar reputation. Possible pending retirement, his colleagues felt, would be impossible and would break his ego. Not long after Horace's retirement I overheard him in the coffee room, with a cadre of medical students. One of them, unknowing, had the temerity to ask Horace what he did for a living. Horace announced he was on the roster of assistants. "I assist for a living," he answered, but went on to explain: "I used to be a surgeon. Now I assist." He said this evenly and I heard nothing to indicate regret.

Horace had moved on, I realized, and was dealing with one of life's transitions successfully. Perhaps it can be the same with other incursions into our lives in respect of old age and debility. Perhaps we can accept our increasing dependence on others equably, much as the characters in a Monty Python movie disregard loss of one limb after another as just another "flesh wound."

I may have poked and prodded my shipwreck metaphor too far. On thinking further, I see other possibilities.

Though shipwrecks do exist, they don't necessarily connote failure. In marine terms, at times the cargo can be salvaged. There may be survivors, and even if that is not the case, voyagers may have successfully completed the tasks and responsibilities that meant most to them.

If I've overworked the metaphor, let me apologize. The exercise has been serious, but a game of sorts, spawning ideas I might not otherwise have had.

It's been tantamount to looking for buried treasure.

And sometimes finding it.

Editor's note: The views, perspectives and opinions in this article are solely the author's and do not necessarily represent those of the AMA.