

The Last Question

When I was 11 and 12 I became very fond of mathematical puzzles of the sort ‘You have to take a fox, a goat and a cabbage across a river, with only a small rowboat. How do you get all three across safely ie the fox doesn’t eat the goat and the goat doesn’t ditto the cabbage?’ It’s easy when you get into the way of thinking I came to enjoy, and I sought out more and more books of puzzling puzzles from the Dunedin Public Library.

In this way I came across American author Isaac Asimov (1920-1992), who wrote prodigiously from 1950 until 1992. He must have kept very current into his seventies, when he published over 30 books including many for children “Why do we need to brush our teeth?”, ‘Where does the garbage go?’, ‘What causes acid rain?’ Why are the whales vanishing?’

His earlier books included Science Fiction (The Foundation series is highly readable – still – and highly regarded), Robotics (his Three Laws of Robotics first aired in 1942 are still quoted, used and are only now starting to be challenged), short stories, and – my favourite – non-fiction books about everything under the sun (literally): ‘Inside the Atom’, ‘Journey across the Subatomic’, ‘Cosmos’, ‘The end of eternity’, and books about each of the planets. The very large, the very small, the absolutely fascinating, and anything the enquiring mind can come upon: for example ‘is silicon-based life possible?’

The Dunedin Public Library has 124 of his books, including all of the above titles, also ‘Asimov’s Guide to Shakespeare’ and his ‘Guide to the Bible’. He was a polymath. He wrote the following verse for his autobiography

*In memory yet green, in joy still felt,
The scenes of life rise sharply into view.
We triumph; Life’s disasters are undealt,
And while all else is old, the world is new.*

When I much later came to read his autobiography I didn’t get far. The three huge volumes are turgid and self-absorbed and unreadable (by me).

The reason I’m writing all of this is to introduce a short story that has stayed with me, and may have had some influence on my involvement in Sea of Faith. Asimov says it is his favourite short story. Published in 1956, you can find it at <https://www.physics.princeton.edu/ph115/LQ.pdf> I invite you to read it. It is 9 pages long, and science fiction – but stick with it ☺

Winter Recess

No Meeting

June
July
August

Reconvene

20th September

Brain Health

I attended the recent 'Introduction to Brain Health' series at U3A, presented by geriatrician Associate Professor Yoram Barak. Over six weeks he gave a number of very useful ideas to keep our brains healthy (and as far as possible from Alzheimer's). I thought I'd summarise these briefly.

Diet: the Mediterranean diet wins hands down. Which one? Well, we did get some detailed advice but just sticking generally to such a diet has major effects on your health, so just go for the high veg/grains/legumes/olive oil diet and reduce the meat and alcohol as far as possible.

Do you recall news from the US where severe-dementia folk were given headphones and an iPod of their favourite music of their early life? That they 'awoke' and could talk, dance and remember, and found joy again? We saw the movie and it was very compelling. There is a group in the US helping with the purchase of headphones and iPods for such folk, and it seems one might start up here in Dunedin ☺. The power of music to enter our brains via a different route, and to engage our emotions, is extraordinary.

We heard that there was good evidence for practicing meditation daily. Long practice seems to reduce the rate of aging of the brain, and it also makes you 'happier' (my suggestion for this verb would be 'content'). Meditation is a practice in many religious traditions, but it is Buddhism that has brought us

* Focused-attention meditation (which aims to centre the mind in the present and remain aware of distractions)

* Mindfulness meditation (which aims to enable a state of being less emotionally reactive, to minimize emotional distress)

* Compassion and loving kindness meditation (which aims to foster empathy and altruism toward others).

Another issue is loneliness. Brain scans have shown that 'feeling excluded' elicits feelings as

negative and strong as the pain you might feel 'if your knee was hit with a mallet'. The pain is as intense, and felt in the same part of the brain. For lonely older people, who are unlikely to stop feeling lonely of their own accord, this is very serious. Prof. Barak's department, and other initiatives, are looking at ways to address the problem of loneliness in seniors.

A Harvard longitudinal study looking for factors which promote longevity and well-being began in 1938 with 268 new entrant students. The study is now 80 years old, and a number of the participants are still with us. In the 1970s a group of working-class Boston men was added to the cohort. The conclusions (so far) are that money, health, education, or class, were not as important for the longevity and well-being of either group, it was the strength of their relationships: family, and friends. Google "YouTube Robert Waldinger Ted" to hear more about this.

Then of course there are the usual suspects including exercise, with which we were encouraged to persevere as the results added to all the good work from the ideas we gained above ☺

Good wishes, and good health

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Ireland – Fossil Fuel

The Republic of Ireland will become the first country to sell off its investments in fossil fuel companies.

Norway (which earns most of its income from oil and gas) is partially divesting investment in fossil fuels. (*Guardian 20th July*)

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