

# *A Few Notes on a Diamond Jubilee*

*Pete Armstrong*



*Old age isn't so bad when you  
consider the alternative.*

*Maurice Chevalier*

Well, I've made it! I have suffered childhood and adolescence; drifted through university; relished parenthood; survived an office job and middle-age; relished parenthood all over again; walked across Europe and played a little Bach. Now here I stand, resplendent in my dusty suede shoes, scruffy blue jeans, faded cotton shirt and crumpled courderoy jacket; with stubbly chin and hair too short to be unkempt. I'm sixty years old. How did that happen? And more importantly, ought I to take the microphone and say a few words, on this auspicious occasion?

How does one begin?

I've done a few notable things here or there, but cannot remember them now. Family and friends are what matter. Family and friends and walking in the wilds and playing music. Nothing else can cast the faintest shadow over these. My only regrets are when I did not hold family sufficiently close; I did not walk enough; I did not play music early enough in my life. What else matters?

From my lofty perch, high up on the plinth of venerability, I can confirm the old cliches you heard from past generations are true. Any sixty year old can do that. My grandparents became very old, my father was middle aged, but I am neither, and never will be. I am still fired by the same childish enthusiasm that drove me through my teens. The image of Fenella Fielding — *do you mind if I smoke?* — is no less appealing today than when I first watched it as a panting teenager, intoxicated on wine gums. Let the decades drip their pools of mouldy wax upon the table! I remain the same eager youngster, with life stretching out in front of them, that ever I was. Sorry, there's nothing new here, only my own astonishment that what applied to so many others before, applies to me too.

I was fortunate to discover Jerome K. Jerome early in life. Is he history's most underappreciated writer? He had no truck with the secret of life being something deeply-hidden and mystical. No, his advice was direct and clear:

*1 lb. beefsteak, with 1 pt. bitter beer every 6 hours.*

*1 ten-mile walk every morning.*

*1 bed at 11 sharp every night.*

*And don't stuff up your head with things you don't understand.*

The secret of life is that simple. JKJ's prescription is the only self-help guide anyone needs. Follow it and, like the author, come to the happy result that your life will be preserved, and still go on.

And what shall I add to these flecks of gold, now that I have taken the chance?

*Get your head down at school and get a job you like. Then you won't have to do a stroke of real work in your life;*

*By all means have fun with other people's sexy bodies when you're young, but make damn sure you marry someone you like.*

The fear of getting old is just a fear of the future. When I was twenty I dreaded being fifty. But then my fifties were the best decade of all, not without a few downs, but mostly full of joy. Now I still dread things that might happen in years to come, but life today is just wonderful. Let it always be so. Perhaps when I'm ninety I'll struggle outside for a ten minute walk each day. I'll enjoy doing that, and dread when it will no longer be possible. Who knows? You need only focus on today.

Mine has been an academic life, full of degrees and research papers and University Challenge. I'm that kind of person. Can I make a confession? Take advantage of the years rushing by to speak the unspeakable? Thank you. It's not that I don't appreciate what an exceptional person Bertrand Russell was. In fact, I can still wax lyrical on some of his mathematical work, but ...

*I have never understood what philosophy actually is*

There. Now, I've said it. That feels better. Can we move on?

I joined an internet dating site in my early forties and quickly found I was quite good at it. This was a revelation, as through the years I have been remarkably bad at every other form of dating in which my peers excelled. I hardly knew how to respond to the surge of positive messages that bulged my inbox: that had never happened to me before. My wife and I met for a first date in a cotswold country pub where we ate and chatted away. I drove home that night with one thought clear in my head: this evening is going to preface the rest of your life. Things still going according to plan.

I never thought of myself as a children's person, until my first newborn son nestled in my arms. Since that moment I have been nothing else. I held four newborn children in my arms and threw myself uncompromisingly into parenthood: reading, drawing and playing to the exclusion of just about everything else. I've loved every minute. Even with my younger children growing, I'm still reading picture books every week with a local förskola. I start again with *Den konstaren som målade en blå häst*, next term.

I had a mid-life crisis. In my fiftieth year my wife took up a high-powered job in a new country. This gave me no choice other than to resign my own office job and move to a family villa in Sweden where I have spent the time since looking after our children and doing creative work, with no pressure to be commercially successful. Call me a realist, call me the world's jammiest sod, call me what you will. There hasn't been an hour since that I haven't rejoiced in my good fortune.

Then I had another, and began to play music in my mid-fifties. Why on earth didn't I begin fifty years earlier? The intervening period would have been much more fun.

And now, having chattered on for a bit, we shall get a bit more fatalist, just in case you thought this piece was only going to address wine gums and playing music.

The probability of one percent is worth some contemplation, sixty years in. If something has a one percent chance of happening this year, then really it's not going to happen. Can I throw a double six just when I need it? Will my plane plummet out of the sky? The supermarket run out of coffee? Will my novel get published? How about a moose breaking my arm? These events all have an annual probability of one percent — more or less — and none of them will happen to me this year.

People surround us, many of them young men marinated in testosterone, taking daily risks with life, going too fast, wobbling on the precipice. All are confident that things will turn out just fine.

The trouble is, by the time you get to sixty, slightly more than half of these one percent events have unfolded before your tired eyes, to you, to family and friends. You don't want to be trite, you have no wish to disturb the fun of these youngsters playing around you, but you are a gammal gubbe now, and you've seen it all before, or at least, around sixty percent of it.

I reflect back on events I have witnessed in my life, and once I start putting this list together there is no stopping me, more and more slink out from dusty and unkempt corners of my mind. I wish that more of them were happy, but the old sayings remain true: when life goes well it trundles on as normal, upset invariably brings trouble.

A friend committed suicide;

I approached a road junction with an oncoming motorcyclist signalling right, which meant I was clear to go. I can still remember exactly the muscle flex as my foot moved onto the accelerator, then suddenly jumped back to the brake because something, somewhere was terribly wrong. I stalled and the motorcycle continued, regardless of their indication, straight through the junction and across where my car would have been accelerating;

I won a writing competition;

I said goodbye to a friend, and a couple of days later got a phone call from one of our group to say that she had been killed in a car crash. Someone else's blind overtake didn't go well. The group met again the following week for the funeral;

I lost my luggage on an international flight and had to go shopping for underwear before I could change clothes;

A young boy wobbled on a skateboard on the edge of the sidewalk ahead of my car. He pitched suddenly into the road directly in front of me and I avoided hitting him;

I threw a perfect game of snakes and ladders. Four dice throws all spot on to get me home in the minimum;

I watched a friend slowly succumb to MS. Around this time our second daughter was born, a much loved younger sister to our first. My friend confided in me that her daughter had asked her, "Mummy, when you get better from MS, will I be able to have a sister?"

A tyre blew out at 100 km/h on the motorway. Fortunately it was a back tyre which meant that I could still steer. Not a front one;

And on another occasion there was a bad crash directly behind me on the same motorway. Chaos in my rear view mirror while I drove on in splendid isolation;

I dislocated my hip, then walked home;

I became stranded in the snow, not once but several times. Passers-by are all brilliant.

I got salmonella. Not a minor version but the full-scale, writhing in agony on the floor, formal investigation from the county hospital one. Don't recommend that;

I've spent nights sleeping rough;

I slipped a disk while shovelling gravel. Never mind the flu, that puts forty years on you;

I parked up on dry land and walked home through the flood, thigh-deep in water.

I lost several friends to cancer, including one lady who left us in the middle of family life, her four children spread out through the primary school ages. That was the worst one;

I threw 180 in a darts match;

I was on a plane that went through a missed approach procedure at Heathrow.

I have no intention to spoil your day with this list. You have your own one, anyway, of all those things that should never happen, but did anyway. This is just evidence from my life that the one percent stuff does happen, around one percent of the time. With experience comes a desire, not to stop having fun, but to limit one's impetuosity. We all know it's safe to step onto the zebra crossing. But those of us who want to traverse safely to sixty and beyond check first, every time, for that single occasion when the one percent driver speeds unheedingly down the road towards you.

And what does it mean if I've watched something happen half a dozen times? Well, the probability of it happening must be higher. Why do we make life so hard for ourselves?

I've seen at least half a dozen teenage pregnancies, which will have brought aspects of joy, but also disrupted lives. I've seen at least half a dozen children separated from parents after an upbringing which was full of love, as well as all the other stumbles and pratfalls of life.

And yet in all this time I've never known a lottery winner. Not a friend, not a friend of a friend. I won't pitch life's happiness on that one, not when there is companionship, adventure and music available all around us, without even needing to buy a ticket.

If it really is true that having the flu adds twenty years to you — which explains why my sorry-looking, flu-wracked body has been wandering around the house lately with the stumbling gait of the ancient — then this means I get to spend the whole of next year creaking along like a forty year old with the flu. Woo Hoo. Bring it on.



Do you have a response? I'd love to read it: [sixty@armstrong99.com](mailto:sixty@armstrong99.com)