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Let's embrace the miracle of our long lives

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If nothing is more precious than the gift of life, we are not only richer but also more equal than ever before.

In effect, the most striking feature of the 2018-20 life tables that the Australian Bureau of Statistics released last week is not life expectancy's continued increase; it is that virtually all of the increase is due to the rising share of the population that reaches what used to be considered the extremes of longevity.

Perhaps the easiest way to visualise the trend is to think of those extremes as a wall.

If average life expectancy has risen as much as it has it is not primarily because the wall has moved to ever-higher ages.

Rather, it is because more and more of us make it to the wall, leaving fewer hopes dashed and families shattered by loved ones dying "before their time".

Demographers refer to the trend as the "compression of mortality" and measure it in many ways. But whichever approach one uses, its extent is dramatic.

Assume, for example, that the maximum age at death is 101 years, so that a hypothetical

population of 1000 people could enjoy a cumulative total of up to 101,000 life-years.

If many died young while only a few survived until 101, most of those potential life-years would never become a reality; conversely, if almost everyone made it to the maximum age, the years actually lived would approach the 101,000 years limit.

The share of the potential maximum life-years that are actually lived can therefore be viewed as a measure of the degree to which all lifetimes have converged to the ceiling.

Put in those terms, the Australia of 1881-90, when the first Australian life tables were compiled, was hardly egalitarian in its distribution of life-years: while a reasonable share of the population reached age 65, less than half the life-years that the population could have lived were actually lived, the rest being lost to infant mortality and to high death rates in working age.

However, by the 1960-62 life table, the share of the maximum life-years actually lived had increased to 68 per cent. And in the latest life table it has climbed to 83 per cent, with two-thirds of the population surviving to 80 and almost a third to their 90th birthday – as compared with just 34 per cent making it to 80 in 1960-62 and barely 7 per cent to 90.

The economic implications of that change have been extensively discussed; but its political consequences may be no less significant.

After all, at next year's election, the age of the median voter – the person halfway between the youngest and the oldest members of the electorate – will, at 50, be unprecedentedly high.

What is even more striking, however, is the increase in the median voter's residual life expectancy; that is, the number of years 50 year old voters have left to live.

In the 1974 election, held soon after the voting age had been reduced to 18, the median voter could expect to live a further 29 years; in contrast, next year's median voter, despite being significantly older than the median voter of 1974, can look forward to 36 more years of life.

It would therefore be unsurprising if the difficulties of finding a new job in one's 50s, the need to finance many years in retirement and the challenge of coping with faltering health in old age all weighed increasingly heavily on voters' decisions, inducing a greater degree of political caution.

But the demographic changes have their darker sides as well. For example, thanks to the compression of mortality, we will, as in Tom Lehrer's song about the atomic bomb, "all go together when we go", albeit not "suffused with an incandescent glow".

In other words, entire cohorts, having marched in compact formation to the outer limits of longevity, will more or less perish at once. And because the baby boom cohorts that are headed for extreme old age are 1½ times larger than the cohorts that immediately preceded them, their demise will eventually boost the average annual number of deaths from around 160,000 to nearly 230,000.

The most tangible effects of that wave of deaths will, no doubt, manifest themselves in the transfer of assets between generations; but one wonders what the social consequences will be as more and more young people experience the passing away of grandparents and even great-grandparents who – for what may be the first time in history – have lived long enough to become familiar faces.

It is, in tackling that question, hard not to hark back to Martin Heidegger's philosophy; for however much one despises the man himself, there is more than a grain of truth in his contention that confronting the eruption of death into the densely layered fabric of life forces us to acknowledge both the finality of our own existence and the responsibility we bear for what we make of it.

And there is also a great deal of truth in his claim that the modern world, which so effectively hides the end of life from our gaze, encourages a "constant fleeing in the face of death" that prevents us from learning how to deal with life's finitude maturely and "authentically", instead fuelling a gnawing angst that breaks out when what Philip Roth called "the rude touch of the Terrible Surprise" suddenly looms on the horizon.

Perhaps there is more than a hint of that angst in today's renewed cults of the apocalypse, stretching from the hyperbole at Glasgow to the hysteria that tinged Australia's response to the pandemic.

Like Woody Allen, we all want to achieve immortality not through our works but by living forever; and when death appears, we seem so desperate to run from it as to be willing to sacrifice much of what gives substance to life itself.

However, as the Greeks knew, immortality is reserved for the gods; the virtue that human beings were granted, and that the gods were denied, was courage – precisely because humans are mortals, and so need the resoluteness to cope with human finitude.

And the Greeks knew too that it was the finitude of our existence that makes the gift of life so enormously precious.

By all means, then, let us celebrate the miracle of more equally distributed longevity, of the joys it brings, and even more so the wrenching pain it avoids – from the death of mothers and babies in childbirth to the loss of young men and women in life's prime. But let's also hope for greater courage, maturity and responsibility, not least in facing the ending that remains, as ever, inescapable.