

The Young and the Old and the Middle Ages

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Worthing Herald Article

23rd May 2019

Hazel Thorpe's Mayor's Service on Sunday was led by the Reverend Hazel Sherman at the West Worthing Baptist Church. The congregation was impressed by the confident reading of the Lesson by the new Youth Mayor.

On Monday at Westminster I was invited to meet young pupils from School 21 in Stratford, east London. They were showing off their oracy skills. Yes, I know: it was a new word to me too. The term oracy was coined about fifty years ago by Andrew Wilkinson, the educational researcher. He wanted to have a way to match literacy and numeracy, describing oral skills in education.

Think about it. Spoken and written communication are equally important. Knowledge is interaction between what is known already mixed with new experience. It was fascinating to ask a succession of them to talk: they looked at me, spoke fluently and avoided parroting a written speech.

In exchange, I gave them possible tips for whenever they might be involved in a television discussion. If you sit with your bottom at the back of the sofa or chair, you can relax while looking fine. Slide forward a few inches or a few more centimetres, shoulders drop, stomach sticks out and you feel awkward. Then I suggested looking either at the interviewer or at another participant when they speak. Lastly, never worry about appearing because it is not your fault you are there. If they could have found someone better, they would have done.

A great collection of therapy dogs came to Westminster so their owners could tell us about the benefits they bring to people across the country. Temperament-tested therapy dogs bring comfort, distraction and joy to those in need. They come in all shapes and sizes, supporting those with clinical depression, stroke patients and with dementia; and can be found in hospitals, hospices, special needs schools and general schools.

One of my Tuesday meetings was considering longevity: how could we gain five more years of HLE Healthy Life Expectancy within the next 15 years? Health care contributes 10%, socioeconomic and environmental factors 20%, genes are more important at 30% and the most significant at 40% are lifestyle and behaviours. I made the obvious point that the way we nurture and raise our children matters too. Fathers-to-be smoking and mothers-to-be drinking alcohol can affect a baby's health and its future life chances.

Healthy life in our mature decades is helped by a mixture of worthwhile activities, caring for others and being cared for by others, together with reasonable steps to reduce falls and avoidable injuries. We are living longer, healthier and happier lives though the cynic might claim that the best people chose to stay or to come to the south coast.

The in-between years contain a mixture of experiences. Many get by reasonably happily with no real disasters at home or at work. Others face major obstacles. I believe that together, by voluntary associations and by public decisions or actions, people who need help get it as soon as it is possible.

The youth training opportunities from the 1980s transformed the lives of a generation who might otherwise have experienced long-term unemployment with possible health and certain wealth effects. The enterprise allowance scheme encouraged many to try self-employment; there are many businesses that started then.

Without trying to be partisan, I think that if we can encourage self-reliance and the rewards of effort, we can do much more to meet needs caused by chance or disaster. Mayors and faith ministers do much to support all those dedicated to these causes.