

Managing the End Game

GEOFFREY PINK's plans for his old age were thwarted by the death of a friend and a move to a soulless community. But he finally got it right

I first met Robert on a U3A course in Cambridge. We took to having a cup of tea together after a session. Two old men swapping ailments. He had a stiff leg but could drive. I had an uncertain right leg and couldn't. He drove us to various classes where we learnt, and forgot, all about genetics, philosophy, impressionism, Dutch art, Shakespeare sonnets and Carl Jung.

One day I asked him how old he was. 'Eightysoddignine,' he said. A reply that enchanted my wife, who thereafter never called him by any other name.

'How old are you?' He asked me. 'Seventy-eight.'

'Well just look at us. Look at half the people we see on courses. We're not living. We're just wasting time till we drop off the perch. We were clever once. Why can't we do something clever about the way we manage this precious time?'

I was inspired. 'Why don't we design a course and offer it to the U3A?' I said. 'Let's call it Managing the End Game. We could assemble a doctor, a gym instructor, a philosopher, the manager of a care home and a choirmaster. We could tap into their expertise and create a formula for a rich and enjoyable old age.'

'We could energise the participants, build them into a team and do things together' added Robert 'being sure to make it fun. Maybe we could find a sex therapist.'

It was an interesting plan and it might have worked. But a month later Robert was dead and my doctor had looked at my legs and told me to sell our five-storey house and buy a bungalow.

So Anne and I had to try again. We got online and found a gated community in Virginia Water. It had started life as a hospital designed and built by Thomas Holloway of Royal Holloway College. It was said to have been a

refuge for middle-class loonies. Eventually it was taken over and abandoned by the NHS and rescued from decay by developers. They added houses and flats, one of which we bought.

It had quite a lot going on for it: it was safe; it was near a station; it had a gym and a swimming pool with a hammer-beam roof. But five years down the track it was clearly not the answer. I'd caused a traffic jam in Trafalgar Square when I discovered that I could no longer climb into a taxi and I stopped going to the gym; and I could only use the pool when there was somebody there to get me out of it.

Much more seriously, we made no friends. Of the three other flats on our floor, one was never occupied and the others were on three-month lets. The expensive houses, three times the price of our flat, were occupied by people who only wanted to talk to one another. There was no social life.

'This place has no soul,' said Anne. 'We must move.'

'Remember Dolly in America?' I said. 'She moved into a retirement village on Long Island. I think they are starting them here.'



'...but the tall one on the left needs to work on her arabesque'

'I'm not sure about that. I'm not ready for closing down.'

Nevertheless we persevered. We got online, read a lot of brochures and visited half a dozen retirement villages. They varied. Some we ruled out because their flats had only one bathroom. Others because they had no grounds, or had grounds but didn't cut the grass. One had very commercial and greedy ways.

But one impressed us. It had been in the care business for a long time and had medical back-up. Its flats were newly built and attractive. It had 250 acres of farmland and a charging point for my buggy. The service charge was the same as we were paying and it subsidised the restaurant. It had a shop and a string of activities that you could take or leave. So with high hopes, and some trepidation, we sold our flat and bought another.

The first thing we noticed was the way everybody said hello. Everybody. You cannot imagine what that does for your morale. However grumpily I go to the shop for my morning paper, I come home in a good mood. This led us to a truth about our retirement village that we had not expected. Its real value lies not in its facilities and activities, however attractive, but in its people.

We have nobbs and plebs, colonels and privates, professionals and students, judges and plaintiffs, and everything in between. We have people fit enough to till an allotment, play bowls and croquet and go dancing, and people in wheelchairs making the best of their diminishing life with eye-watering courage. (We also have pessimists as well as optimists and nobody is perfect.)

But despite our different histories, we have one over-arching characteristic in common. We are all here for a reason. We have all chosen to try to Manage the End Game.

Robert would be very pleased.