

## Robert Dessaix @170.mp3

[00:00:00] Welcome to be in the West Speaker Series. Before we begin, I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land, the Gadigal and Wangal people of the Eora nation and pay my respects to the elders past, present and emerging. Today's conversation will be with Robert Dessaix. This conversation is in Celebration of Seniors Festival 2021. Robert Dessaix, is best known as a writer of literary nonfiction, including memoirs, essays and autobiography. He has also published two novels, several short stories and one play. He has taught the Russian language and literature at ANU and has written widely about French and Russian literature. He has also published translations of works by Russian authors such as Anton Chekhov. The Time of Our Lives is his latest book and deals with aging well spanning locations from Java to Hobart and Berlin, Robert writes about his intimate conversations with close friends, reflecting on mortality, time and dance. Welcome, Robert, your book, The Time of Our Lives. What made you choose the title?

[00:01:11] I wanted a playful title, to be quite honest, because, as you know, in this book, play is an important concept.

[00:01:19] I think being playful is an important part of being a human being and particularly valuable when you're older. And I just thought that Time of Our Lives could be read straight. That is, I'm really talking about having a fabulous time or it could be read as being a bit sardonic. Maybe I'm being just very slightly sarcastic, knowing that at the end of one's life, one is likely to encounter all sorts of problems. So I thought it was a good title for that reason.

[00:01:46] Excellent. So in your book, you reflect on aging well and how best we can do this. What to you are the most important things that enable us to live and age well?

[00:01:57] Well, my response will be personal, of course, and in the book, I talk to a whole range of mostly women about what they think on this subject. Everyone is going to have their own priorities. But amongst the consolations and they're consultations, I would have to say the possibilities of looking at time rather differently instead of looking at time as a kind of sequence, as a kind of conga line that we can't get out of. I'm trying to suggest trying looking at time as something that pools around you, something that is

more horizontal that you can enjoy in segments, I suppose, rather than as one thing after another. I do understand that time is time. There's nothing you can do about it. But I think that you can look at it rather differently and you can have different expectations of it. Another thing is not caring very much about anything anymore.

[00:02:54] When we're young we take ourselves so seriously.

[00:02:56] But when you ask older people what they really care about, the number of things they really care about is reduced. They might care about global warming. I don't know. They might care about their grandchildren, but the number of things is going to be much smaller. And that's right across the board. I really didn't encounter anyone who cared about things as much as they did when they're young. You don't have to keep up anymore. You see, that's the wonderful thing. You don't have to keep up with the latest books or the latest music or the latest anything. You can just enjoy being you in this pool of time. I think decluttering is important as you get older and I use a Japanese word Yutori for a particular kind of a decluttering where you have just enough for your basic needs plus a little bit. And I think that is a wonderful way to approach life, just enough space a little bit, just enough money plus a tiny bit. Just enough time plus a little bit.

[00:03:52] And animation, as you know from reading the book, I'm very much in favour personally

[00:03:59] If not, all your listeners will be will agree with me. But I'm very much in favour of an animated old age and I'm not against this notion that we should all slump into a kind of tranquility as if quiet and tranquil, tranquility and calm were the most important thing. I don't think so. Really. You're going to be dead for the rest of time. Why would you want to be tranquil? Be alive! Yeah, I want to be more alive than I was last week. That's what I want. And I do understand that at one o'clock in the morning, you don't want noisy neighbours. Obviously you don't want noisy neighbours at 1:00 o'clock in the morning.

[00:04:36] But as a lifestyle, I want to feel energized. That's one of the reasons I choose Ganesha as a kind of, would you say, a kind of icon for me, the dancing elephant headed Indian God in whom I do not believe that I have a little statue of Ganesha right here beside me now and Ganesha is dancing through life and that's what I want to do. I

don't want to lie down. But the two most important things, and I think you've probably I'm sure you have picked up on those two things, are friendship and the inner life. Those are the two things that I think will carry you through in a way that allows you to speak of your life as a good old age, a good life and a good old age of the intellect.

[00:05:25] So what can you tell us about friendship that's actually in your book quite a lot. And you've spoken to a lot of friends in terms of writing this book.

[00:05:33] And Katerina says that intimate friendship opens you up, frees you and friendship between two hearts it's a two way street you have to be worth befriending. What can you say about that?

[00:05:48] Yes, it sounds a little, cruel doesn't it? But Katerina, who lives in Berlin, is very straightforward.

[00:05:53] Katerina is older than I am. I guess she's in her 80s and does not have children, does not have a current husband. And therefore, for Katerina, friendship is all important. It's one of the only things that is really worth staying alive for friendship. She's right is the ability to be intimate, to open up to a handful of people. You only need three people four maybe at the absolute most, six with whom you have this level of openness and intimacy. But to have it, you must be worth befriending. People forget that sometimes they say, you know, I feel a bit lonely. I don't have any friends. Well first of all, befriend yourself, make sure you like yourself. No one will want to befriend somebody who doesn't like himself or herself, you have to be worth befriending. You have to have roots in something. You have to have dimensions. And, of course, you have to know how to in some sense of the word love. Sseems such a simple word and it's only one syllable and we use it far too often. But you have to have some notion of how to love and then you will find without even trying that you have friends.

[00:07:15] So it's really about self-love, isn't it?

[00:07:18] Well, Jesus did say something about others as you love yourself. I think, you know, I don't read the Bible every day, but I think he did.

[00:07:27] And I think that it's important. Yes. That you think of yourself as part of a very small community of souls. And in that quote that you read out, I use the word heart. And for me, perhaps, you notices, just heart is a very important word. It's not just your mind that must be lovable. It's that other organ. And I know it's not the heart in Indonesian. It's actually the liver, oddly enough. But it must be this part of you where feelings and reason merge. That's really deeply important part of you. And that's what will be loved. That's what will attract others. That place in you, that enactment of you, which is a mixture of both reason and of feeling deep, feeling. The rest well, you know, I can get from the Internet, really, I can get intellect on the Internet.

[00:08:27] I can get feeling in all sorts of movies.

[00:08:29] But as a real human thing, even though I know you're not supposed to use the word human anymore, it's been written out of the vocabulary. But I use it as a real human thing. This is what I think we need to aim for. I think it's easier for women and that's why there are more women in my book, at least in our society, than there are men. For men, it can be it can require a special effort to nourish this thing called heart.

[00:09:00] Or liver if you're Indonesian  
I love the way they call it the liver  
I'm not sure that I do, but I've gotten used to it.

[00:09:11] And of course, as you know, I'm mentioning Indonesian here because the first half of the book, at least I think perhaps through other bits are actually set in Java in Indonesia, in Yogyakarta, just outside Yogyakarta with some of your listeners will no doubt know.

[00:09:26] So in terms of your heart or the heart, is that the same thing as the inner self?

[00:09:34] I'm pleased you asked that. Not quite really. I mean, again, this is not a self-help book. I'm not giving people instructions. I'm reporting conversations. Take what you want from them. But no, not quite. The inner life which comes up right at the beginning of the book, really is at the very heart of everything in this book. I think without it, it's very impossible to have a good life at all at any time, let alone when you're old. The

inner life for me is a performance. That's the key. It's not just that you went to the movies yesterday or you really enjoyed listening to a Bach cantata last night or that you collect stamps and enjoy talking about this with other stamp collectors. It is a performed inner life that's important. It is choreographed. It has roots, it has rituals, it has knowledge and understanding. It's much bigger than simply heart. I think heart is the name of this organ where these things happen. But an inner life is more complicated than that, I'm worried about the possibility that this instant gratification kind of society that we live in, a society where you can simply turn on your mobile phone and be gratified, start talking, be talked at listening in is deadening. At least it can never annihilate but is deadening the inner life. That kind of dance, that orchestrated, that symphony, if you like, that is going on inside you. If you have been paying attention, if you have been listening, if you have been asking questions, if you have been curious, if you have been digging into the past, that's what the inner life is.

[00:11:32] Do we all have it? Do you think?

[00:11:35] I think we all have the possibility. Yes, I think absolutely everybody. But you have to be very honest with yourself and and you have to talk to yourself. People are embarrassed about talking to themselves. I talk to myself all the time.

[00:11:51] I mean, not in Woolworths you never know. Sometimes you forget where you are.

[00:11:57] But I think you should talk to yourself so that you are by doing that, enacting this in your life, you have a conversation with yourself. If you want to find another word, apart from dance or apart from symphony, conversation would be the other word that you could use for the inner life. It is a grand conversation, perhaps with many voices, actually, because I think the self is not unitary. At least that's what I think the inner life might be looked at as a whole. But I think it contains many sides. That's how I feel. I think anyone can do it. But the earlier you start, the easier it is. I've noticed that with everybody that I talk to and in life in general, I think that four years old is not too early. I think that forty years old, I think well, I think you should really get busy and start getting one. I do think and this is the bad news, that if you haven't got one and you're already eighty three, it's going to be very difficult now to get one. I think it takes practice. And in our society, it's become common to believe that people don't deserve things, there are

no consequences to what we do. There are consequences. The earlier you start, the better life you'll have. So I think that that's good news. And I think it will carry you through the sorts of days that we're having at the moment when we're living in a *cul de sac* in many ways, we don't know what the way out is. We don't know what the future holds. There are wars, there are volcanic eruptions, there are earthquakes, there are landslides, there are revolutions, there are army takeovers. It's really difficult to be positive about the life. But you can be positive always about your inner life.

[00:13:49] So do you think that people who live in the east, for example, Indonesia and Java, have more of a connection to the inner self?

[00:13:59] You know, I don't know. And I have asked I mean, I have talked about this with Javanese. They're all Javanese or Kapitan Sumatrans, I suppose. I don't know. They have all been I think with one exception, Muslims usually not strongly believing Muslims, but they all have a Muslim background at least. And I can't quite work it out because in the end, we have to move into using Indonesian words to describe the inner life and I don't think that they probably do have more opportunities than we do. I think it's very individual. I think some people do. Some people don't, quite honestly. I mean, what the Indonesians have that we don't have is a different sense of time. I think a sense of time much closer to the one that I'm suggesting here that we can or move into if only we would be willing to do this. That is less achievement oriented since the time that they certainly have. But they also have another thing that I'm proposing here as a wonderful thing in old age, and that is a sense of the village. Of course, in Java, you actually have a village with a main street and, you know, a couple of shops and houses that go out in a couple of directions into the rice paddies. But in our society, that kind of village is not possible. But I think that we must stop locking people up in facilities or institutions for old people or for mad people or for young people or whatever it is, and let people live in more of a village.

[00:15:44] I mean, no old person wants to live amongst a lot of old people. Why would you? You want to live amongst people the way they do in the village, but in a village, the horizons are limited. That's the fact of it. And my friends in Indonesia probably do have a more we say, more restrictive view of the world than I have as someone who's had a good education living in Australia, someone who has been able to travel widely across the planet. Yes, but they may have in some ways a deeper sense of all sorts of things

that I have little access to. They go for depth rather than breadth I think. They also have family. And when you're old family can be a good thing, it isn't always, as I know, from visiting parents in old age homes where many families never visit, the old people can be put away and never visited again. This happens. It's happening right now as I'm sitting here talking to you. But if you have a good family, if you've being a good friend to your family, you can hope, I suppose, that they will come and regularly love you. That's what you can hope, and in Indonesia, which has very different values from Western values the family is much more important than it is here. I'm not a family person myself. I couldn't live like that. But I don't think one civilisation is better than the other. To answer your question, but it's different. And each has its strengths, I suppose.

[00:17:22] So you touched on the concept of playfulness at the start of this interview.

[00:17:28] Do you think that curiosity and the joie de vivre and a healthy inner child is the key to feeling happy or content?

[00:17:37] Yes, I do. I do. And these things are vital, it seems to me and I start talking about them in the second half of the book. More intensity, I suppose. I don't think one wants to become childish, does one, but one should keep a kind of childlike curiosity about the world. What is it about children that we like? There are all sorts of things that we don't like at all, but what do we like about children? It's their curiosity. It's their sense of wonder. Well, when you're older, it's really hard to hold on to wonder unless you make a special effort. You've seen it all before. When you are six and you first see a rainbow or four, you're full of wonder. When I see a rainbow, I think there's another rainbow. So I saw one just last week I know how rainbows are formed and why they're there. And it's pretty. But that's about all I could say. But if you can keep a sense of wonder which is allied to curiosity for goodness sake, how did that happen, that sort of sense? Tell me more about that. Let me focus on that. Let me peer into it and see if I can work it out. If you can keep that. That keeps you going from day to day today. The moment, for example, I'm being very curious about Indonesia. For me, that's new. I'm learning Indonesian. For me, that's new. I've learned other languages. I'm no good at Indonesian. But it's new. It's something I'm curious about. How do you say kindness in Indonesian? So if I'm having a cup of coffee, I think how do you say kindness in Indonesian and I go to the computer and look up six words that mean kindness and ask myself what the difference between them is.

[00:19:19] Or I might go for a walk in the bush here in Tasmania and look at flowers or trees that I've never seen before or never noticed before, and ask my companion, what is that? When does it flower? Why none of these things lead to anything. In the end, I will be dead. But in the meantime, these things are keeping me alive. They are childlike, they're curious, and there is a joy, a joie de vivre, if you like, but a joy. In the course of each day, I will be more content, I think, than happy, happiness for me as a kind of burst of joy which simply lands upon you if you put yourself in, it's way, you can't cower in the back room and expect to be joyful. You have to get out and about and take some risks. And then joy will fall on you. It will hit you like a thunderbolt. But contentment is much less ecstatic. Contentment is the sense that you are fulfilled at some deep level. You will never be fulfilled while there is suffering in the world and there will always be suffering. One of the things you can do is do something about that, whether it is, you know, looking after abandoned animals or whether it is subscribing to Medecins Sans Frontieres at 20, I don't know what it might be, it will be different for every individual. But you must do something about suffering, other people suffering I think in order to be contented and get out and about a bit and trust that happiness will hit you about the head because you didn't even see it coming. And together, those two things make for a certain consolation in being haggard looking and not being able to work quite as gently as you once used to.

[00:21:13] So when you were to borrow Borobodur, were you inspired?

[00:21:18] How did you feel there?

[00:21:19] No, I wasn't. And I was intrigued. I was curious. I was uplifted. I was invigorated. I've been there three times, I think altogether. But I am not a Buddhist person. I'm a very un Buddhist person, actually, a very un Islamic person. I would have to add and a very un Buddhist person. I am not a religious person. And so I come from a Western Enlightenment tradition. That's my heritage as everybody says today, the 17th century French thinking, 18th century French thinking, that's my heritage. Reason really is my heritage. And Buddhism I regard with a sort of friendly, warm feeling. But I don't believe it. No, I don't have any beliefs about the self that really are Buddhist I would have to say. But I'm not afraid of entering into conversation with things that in the end I'm not going to believe in I suppose. It's all part of the world, and the thing I like



about Buddhism is that traditionally it's not quite the case in Myanmar this morning, but traditionally Buddhism is less aggressive than Christianity and Islam can be, historically. And of course, one warms to it for that reason. And it's one of the religions, interestingly enough, that it is socially acceptable in Australia in the 21st century to convert to. Converting to anything else except Quakerism possibly is not acceptable. People's hackles are raised and they look in the other direction.

[00:23:07] Robert, you also talk a lot about sex and aging in the book. Oh, do I really? And I know a few friends of mine, older ladies, who tell me that they're invisible, basically. Do you believe that as we grow older, we become invisible and undesirable?

[00:23:27] In a word, yes, we do. I mean, you know, people walk in front of me and stand in front of me in queues at the post office on the grounds that they didn't even see I was there. People bump into me in the streets because they thought it was an empty space. But I don't care about that. There will be some if it is really important to you, who will find you desirable. But look, we have to face facts. We are simply not as desirable for good Darwinian reasons when you're eighty-seven as you were when you were 18. You just ain't. One of the ways to have a good old age, I think, is to stop desiring things that you're really never going to have. And so a lot of people, when they're older, simply decide that they will go for Eros instead or they will go for something else. It might be some other kind of loving or closeness or affection. Some people are very relieved. And I talk about them in the book that sex isn't strangling strangling them anymore. But they never liked it much in the first place.

[00:24:35] I thought it was, it advertised itself far too brashly and they're quite pleased to see it fade. Other people are a little sad. And I suppose that something that gave such joy is no longer quite so easy. In men, of course, they are going to have erection problems, to be absolutely frank with you. They're going to have erection problems and you're going to have to live with the fact that something will have to be done about that, if you're going to have the sort of sex life that you had so much fun with when you were under well, under 50, let's say it's different for everybody, but that is the main worry of men. And you're going to have to work around it. You're going to have to work around everything actually. That's how you have a good old age. And it's not a tragedy. It's just something that you do. But some people, mostly it's women, friends of mine in the 70s

do find love quite sexual, sexually exciting love, they do, you can find someone who finds you desirable, but the statistics change. That's true.

[00:25:50] At the end of your book, Robert, you describe how mesmerized you are, with a performance by the Javanese children. Can you explain why you felt like that?

[00:26:01] Yes. These Javanese children are learning how to dance classical Javanese dance actually. They're going to probably dance at the Sultan's palace in the future. Sultan's palace has wonderful dancers, of course, in Yogyakarta. I found it exciting because Javanese classical dance is all about schooling, but it's about discipline plus play, and as you know, for me, that is the ideal, discipline but also the play the two things together. For example, we see mostly in our culture in dances like the tango, a highly disciplined. The way you hold everything finger is important, but also playful, erotic with roots in an older culture. It's about passion and it's about beauty. And look, when you get older, beauty is much more important to you than sense. So I looked on those children as exemplifying something very important to me about the inner life, about this disciplined yet at the same time playful, choreographed, patterned dance. It also allows for different kinds of masculinity, which are very difficult to enact in Western society, in particular Australian society at the moment. But it is it really happened to me. It astonished me and I'm grateful that I saw.

[00:27:37] As we're getting older what are the main fears that we face.

[00:27:43] When you talk to older people about this, it turns out to be not death, which you might have expected. I, for example, also, I'm not frightened of death as one can be when one is a teenager or twenty three or four or even forty three. It's more likely to be loneliness, actually particularly when a partner dies, it's likely to be dementia. Pain, I suppose, and saying good bye. But particularly loneliness and as I said before, the only thing we can do about that is to move beyond the family into good friendships. The example of what might be feared would be what happened to my partner, Peter's mother, Rita. There are several chapters in the book about Rita and Rita's eventual death in an old people's home in Hobart, because there you see the loneliness, despite the fact that she was a good woman. I blame this woman in many ways, but you see the shrinking of the self, in fact, the evaporation of the self. And I think that, yes, it's sad, but I tried to show how one might cope with that, if that's what you're faced with in someone

even older than you are yourself. I know that people feel that I perhaps judged Rita a little. Rita did not have an inner life. I simply wanted to be frank. I didn't want to write a sob story. This is what it is like to say goodbye. This is how it feels. This is what it looks like. And that's why Rita is there.

So, Robert, do you have anything else you'd like to add?

I stress again, it is not a how to book. It is Robert talking to six or eight people about a good old age. And I do acknowledge that a good old age is only possible if you have some sort of balance of health and mental sturdiness. Of course it is. But I don't want to talk about extreme cases of infirmity, I think it is better if I take those things for granted and then see how we might have the time of our lives.

[00:30:20] Such a pleasure, Robert. Thank you so much for your time today. The Time of Our Lives is published by Brio and is available for purchase at any bookshop. You can also borrow it at the library. We also have several copies of Robert's books available via our online catalogue in book and e-book formats. Thank you for listening and looking for upcoming digital content through the Inner West Library, What's on and social media channels.