

Respect for Elders - a reflection by Rev. Dr. Douglas Purnell - 2009

In 1986 I wrote a major piece on the issues that young people have to address in order to become adult in the context of their family of origin. These things included:

- identity
- values
- life goals
- education
- career choice
- financial independence
- peer relationships with a view to choosing a life partner: and intimacy
- sexuality
- crossing the void.

So I have begun to think about the stage of life associated with being an elder: what are the important things for them?

With the increased life span in western countries – the longer periods of retirement experienced by many people. Many will experience half a life-time of retirement. When the dreamed of travel etc is over – what then? Will these years be a time of peace, satisfaction, reflection on a life well-lived? A movement from mid-life tasks to ageing well? The way we face ageing is a decision.

Joan Chittister: "The Gift of Years"

Post retirement: 'Only one thing is necessary now: we must choose to begin a new kind of life, related to the past, of course, but free of strictures that bind us to it. We must see what we do in it as good. We must find it life-giving ourselves. We must be a gift to the world some way, somehow, for someone.

It's those who go into this period washed-out, dried up, angry, hurt, humiliated, and resisting, for whom newness is a bane rather than a blessing. These people sit sullen or listless in a chair, not reviving themselves, not vivifying anyone else in life, either. They bring no joy to the world because they have no joy to give. They become grumpy old men, whining old women – not because that is what old age is about, but because they have chosen to be less than what they are meant to be. They have chosen to be less than what God has in mind for them these years – another kind of fullness of life, another kind of usefulness" p.48-49

Maybe call to mind someone they know who is "ageing well" in this sense – maybe in spite of physical limitations.

- **Identity:** elders will be integrating their life story. How do you hold together in a coherent way all the experiences of living? Many times I have sat with older

people who were telling the story of their life in most genuine ways that seemed to have a greater function, that of integrating their lived experience.

- what others say about you is a component of identity. As the memory of who a person has been is 'lost'. I mean by this as you get distance in time, on the things that you have achieved or contributed in life, memory of those contributions can be lost. It's sad when we only hear about an older person's life in their eulogy – wish we had known them better beforehand!
- **Life values.** Elders reflect on the way the chosen values have been appropriate in the life journey.... Grace Wilson: At the funeral of her former husband, from whom she had separated more than thirty years previously: “If I had my time over again I'd have forgiven him and we'd have got on with it.”
- **Life Goals:** What have I achieved (in relation to the chosen goals)?
- **Intimate Relationships:**
 - For elders there are a diminishing number of intimate relationships
 - deaths of spouse, family members (siblings) friends: I value the long term relationships in which people know me thoroughly and there is no need to say or do anything... I am known for who I am.... How do people cope when fewer and fewer people know them in this way? For example, For more than thirty years I have gone away each year with a group of friends for a retreat in which we give an account of our lives and ministries. As we get older and frailer and people die, I will lose the intimate support provided by this group and it is unlikely to be replaced.
 - How do people in this stage of life get adequate physical/skin contact in normal social relationships?
 - How do we acknowledge the end of cohabitation of long term partnerships when one is hospitalised (nursing home.)
 - How do we acknowledge the end of sexual cohabitation? For example when someone is suddenly widowed?
 - Very important - the need for intimacy as we age. Barbara Guiliano has said that a lot of older people in care are “handled rather than lovingly touched” (Fits in with the elder abuse question). James Seeber has written that “The opposite of loneliness is not activity, it is intimacy”
- In earlier stages of life we gain respect through our **competence and contribution.** Very much a Western concept – that our value depends on our productivity. As Christians we respect the intrinsic value of each person, made “in the image of God” Genesis. Not just the young and healthy – also the frail and vulnerable.
- As competence and contribution fades, or diminishes, is forgotten what happens to the identity of the person. How do seniors find respect within the society.
 - the possibility of feeling that they are judged as being a parasite on society because of their inability to demonstrate their competence (forgotten/unused competencies) or to make a contribution (diminishing

energy, physical capacity, strength, health, resources. The media tends to emphasize this – the drain of older people on the economy – we need to be critical of this attitude. Our value is in who we are, rather than in what we do. The later stages of life can be seen as the movement from “doing” to “being”

- **Finance:** As capacity to earn money diminishes
 - savings diminishes
 - freedom to choose what to do with one's own resources
 - desire to share resources
- **physical and mental health** becomes a key issue for elders. Diminishing physical and mental capacities determines many things:
 - enjoyment of life
 - experience of pain
 - capacity to participate actively in life
 - mental functioning can lead to dependence on others around key decisions in life

some people seem to die in their minds while their bodies remain fully functioning, (the importance of finding ways of reaching them, when the usual means of communication no longer appear to work) while others die physically while their minds remain very active.

- **Dependence-independence-interdependence** At what point and by what criteria do seniors lose the capacity to make decisions about their own lives?
- **Housing arrangements.** Shifts from family accommodation, downsizing and then to living alone. Further moves to more dependent accommodation in hostel or nursing home.
 - transition to dependence. In childhood parents have to determine for example when a child is capable of crossing a road by themselves; this is a move towards autonomy. In this later stage of life a day comes when the children say, with genuine concern, “we don't think our parent is capable of crossing the road by themselves,” (of course this could be about driving a car, living alone, spending money, deciding about key dimensions of life) This reflects a loss of autonomy.

In the work that I did on 'becoming adult in the context of family,' it was significantly focused on helping/enabling people to be autonomous; to have the capacity to function responsibly with maturity. A key focus was also on equipping parents to know what things they would need to do to enable their children (from early childhood) to appropriately move to independent adulthood.

In a similar way these issues that I have identified, are on the one hand to enable seniors to live appropriately this important stage of their life, and to help their support people (spouse, children, friends, support professionals) know how to help appropriately.

There is a sad movement for some people from independence to dependence, which leaves people vulnerable to abuse in many ways. We can help people live this state of life abundantly if we can educate/make aware those who are closest to them.

Ageism assumes that seniors are not be able to negotiate many of the things mentioned here and can mean assuming that older people are not competent to make such decisions.

Respect for Elders –

- We will recognise and value the lived experience, the story and the identity of the older person
- We will value and honour the chosen values of the older person
- We will value and acknowledge the competence and contribution of lived life (not just present performance)
- We will recognise and honour the diminishing number of intimate relationships of the older person
- We will be alert to the shifts in power and autonomy that happen through physical and mental incapacity (this is so important, isn't it!)
- We will be patient and participatory in negotiated proxy decision making. So many older people experience the feeling of invisibility, being ignored...for example, when visiting the doctor and he/she speaks only to the carer.
- We will be alert to the emotional factors involved when older people are moved by circumstances to live alone.

Douglas Purnell June 2009