

Abide With Me- Caring for Our Aging Self



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Abstract

The society has an obligation of reciprocal action of love, grateful and generous care for the elderly and the aging population. This article looks at care-giving as a service to self with inference that human nature is one, and in the face of others we see ourselves; also elucidating the human craving for companionship in extremis particularly in the later periods of life.

Introduction

The title of this article may suggest to us our special need of others, embodying the human craving for companionship. The life of the elderly can be mirrored within the context of the personage of the 'suffering servant' of Judeo-Christian sacred book. 'Like a sapling he grew up... like a root in arid ground. He had no form or charm to attract us, no beauty to win our heart...a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering... yet ours were the sufferings he was bearing, ours were the sorrows he was carrying, while we thought of him as someone being punished and struck with affliction...; whereas he was being wounded by our rebellions, crushed because of our guilt...' [1].

To reciprocate this act of self-giving and pouring out of self; 'as for me, my life is already being poured away as a libation and the time has come for me to be gone' necessitates the title; Abide With Me. Hence, one is equally encouraged to offer one's own vulnerable self to the elderly in gratitude and as a source of encouragement, this therefore, necessitated the coordinate of the title; Caring For Our Aging Self. To care for the elderly, means first of all to abide with, to enter into close contact with your own aging self, to sense your time, and to experience the movements of your life cycle. From this aging self, encouragement and motivation can come forth and others can be invited to cast off the paralyzing fear for their future.

Abiding to Care

As long as we think that care giving means only being nice and friendly to the elderly, paying them a visit, bringing them flower or offering them a ride, we are apt to forget how much more important it is for us to be willing and able to abide with those we care for. And how can we fully abide with or be fully

present to the elderly when we are hiding from our own aging? How can we listen to their pains when their stories open wounds in us that we are trying to cover up?

How can we offer companionship when we want to keep our own aging self out of the room, and how can we gently touch the vulnerable spots in their lives when we have armored our own vulnerable self with fear and blindness? Only as we enter into solidarity with the elderly and speak out of common experience can we help others to discover the freedom of old age. By welcoming the elderly into our aging self we can be good hosts, and positive reinforcement can take place. Therefore, talking about reciprocal action in the context of caring for the elderly, we talk about first caring as the way to self before talking about caring as the way to others.

Our question here therefore is not how to go out and help the elderly, but how to allow the elderly to enter into the center of our own lives, how to create the space where they can be heard and listened to from within with careful attention. Quite often our concern to teach or cure prevents us from perceiving and receiving what those we care for have to offer. Does recovery, not first of all, take place by restoration of a sense of self-worth? But how can that take place unless there is someone able to discover the beauty of the other and willing to receive it as a precious gift? Where else do we realize we are valuable people except in the eyes of those who by their care affirm our own best self?

To receive the elderly into our inner self, however, is far from being easy. Old age is hidden not just in our eyes, but much more from our feelings. In our deepest self we keep living with the illusion that we will always be the same. We not only tend to deny the real existence of elderly people in their closed rooms and

nursing homes, but also elderly man or woman who is slowly awakening in our own center. They are strangers, and strangers are fearful. They are intruders threatening to rob us what we consider our own [2].

Caring for Our Aging Self

Caring for the elderly means above other things to make ourselves available to the experience of becoming old. Only he who has recognized the relativity of his own life can bring a smile to the face of a man or woman who feels the closeness of death. In that sense, caring is first of all a way to our own aging self, where we can find the healing powers for all those who share in the human condition. No guest will ever feel welcome when his host is not at home in his own house. No elderly person will ever feel free to reveal his or her hidden anxieties or deep desires when they only trigger off uneasy feelings in those who are trying to listen.

It is no secret that many of our suggestions, advice, admonitions, and good words are often offered in order to keep distance rather than to allow closeness. When we are primarily concerned with giving the elderly something to do; offering them entertainment and distraction, we might avoid the painful realization that most elderly people do not want to be distracted but heard, not entertained but sustained. Although the elderly may need a lot of very practical help, more significant to them is someone who offers his or her own aging self as the source of their care. When we have allowed an elderly person to come alive in the center of our own experience, when we have recognized him or her as our own aging self, we might then be able to paint our self-portrait in a way that can be a relief to those in distress. As long as the elderly remain a stranger caring can hardly be meaningful. The old stranger must first become part of our inner self and a welcome friend who feels at home in our own house. What, then, are the characteristics of a caring caregiver, of someone whose care brought him in contact with his own self? There are obviously many, but two seem most important here: poverty and compassion.

Poverty

Poverty is the quality of the heart which makes us relate to life, not as property to be defended but as gift to be shared. Poverty is the constant willingness to say good-bye to yesterday and move forward to new, unknown experiences. Poverty is the inner understanding that the hours, days, weeks, and year do not belong to us but are the gentle reminders of our invitation to give, not only love and work, but life itself, to those who follow us and will take our place. Every caregiver is invited to be poor, to strip him or herself from the illusions of ownership and to create some room for the person looking for a place to rest.

The paradox of care giving is that poverty makes a good host. When our hands, heads, and hearts are filled with worries, concerns, and preoccupations, there can hardly be any place

left for the stranger to feel at home. We can experience this quite literally when we enter a room of a counselor, minister, or teacher, in which walls, tables, and chairs are so covered with books that we can hardly imagine that our own personal concerns can still be perceived as worth listening to. Such a place is like a car that broke down at the heart of the city road, in which so many cars are idling that nobody can move, in which the automobile itself has stopped all movements. Such a place is literally 'pre-occupied.'

Therefore, to create space for the elderly means that I must stop relating to my life as to an inalienable property. How can I ever allow the elderly to enter into my world when I refuse to perceive my life as a fleeting reality I can enjoy but never grasp, as a precious gift I can foster but never cling to? How can I make any elderly person feel welcome in my presence when I want to hold on to my life as a possession that nobody can take away from? How can I create a friendly space for the elderly when I do not want to be reminded of my own historicity and mortality, which make me just much a 'passer-by' as anybody else?

To care for the elderly means then that we allow the elderly to make us poor by inviting us to give up the illusion that we created our own life, and that nothing and nobody can take it away from us. This poverty, which is an inner detachment, can make us to receive the old stranger into our lives and make that person into a most intimate friend. When care has made us poor by detaching us from the illusion of immortality of bodily vitality, we can really be present to the elderly.

We can then listen to what they say without worrying about how we answer. We can pay attention to what they have to offer without being concerned about what we can give. We can see what they are in themselves without wondering what we can be for them. When we have emptied ourselves of false occupation and preoccupations, we can offer free space to strangers, where not only bread and wine but the story of life can be shared [2].

Compassion

In a poor heart compassion can grow, because in a poor heart the pains of growing old can be recognized and shared. Compassion is the second most important characteristic of care giving, since it allows us to overcome the fear of old strangers and invite them as guests into the center of our own intimacy. When we have taken away the artificial and often defensive distinctions between young and old, we will be able to share the common burdens of aging. Then those who care and those who are cared for no longer have to relate to each other as the strong to the weak, but both can grow in their capacity to be human.

Compassion makes us see beauty in the midst of misery, hope in the center of pain. It makes us discover flowers between barbed wire and a soft spot in a frozen field. Compassion makes us notice the balding head and the decaying teeth, feel the weakening handgrip and the wrinkling skin, and sense the

fading memories and slipping thoughts, not as a proof of the absurdity of life, but as a gentle reminder that 'unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain, but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest.'

Compassion makes us break through the distance of pity and bring our human vulnerabilities into a healing closeness to our elderly ones. Compassion does not take away the pains and the agonies of growing old, but offers the place where weakness can be transformed into strengths. Compassion heals, because it brings us together in patience, that is, in purifying waiting for the fulfillment of our lives [2].

So compassion is the quality of the human heart that makes it possible for people of very different ages and life styles to meet each other and to form community. Thomas Merton describes compassion as the purifying desert in which we are stripped of all our false differences and enabled to embrace each other as the children of the same God. He says: "there is no wilderness as terrible, as beautiful, as arid and fruitful as the wilderness of compassion. It is the only desert that shall truly flourish like the lily . . ." [3]. It is this compassion that can make us live many lives, the lives of the young as well as the lives of the elderly. An unknown author once said: "You live as many lives as you speak languages" [1].

That is true because every time we allow another person into our desert and learn to speak his or her language, we live our lives and deepen each other's humanity. And have we ever fully realized how rich the language of the elderly really is? Poverty and compassion are the two main qualities of an authentic caregiver. They are the essentials of self-portrait, which we have to keep painting if we expect to be healers to those we encounter in the midst of their despair and confusion. Let us now see how and when this healing can take place.

Caring for the Elderly

Being a caregiver can lead to a new self-understanding, but self-understanding can never be its own goal. We are for others. Therefore we are called to put aging self at the service of the aging other. The challenge of caring for the elderly is that we are called to make our own aging self the main instrument of our care giving. It seems important, however, to say that caring for the elderly is not a special type of care. As soon as we start thinking about caring for the elderly as a subject of specialization, we are falling into the trap of societal segregation, which care giving is precisely trying to overcome.

When we allow our world to be divided into young, middle-aged, and elderly people, each calling for a specialized approach, then we are taking the real care out of caring, since the development and growth of men and women take place, first of all, by creative interaction among the generations. Grandparents, parents, children, and grand-children– they all make the whole

of our life cycle visible and tangible to us at every moment of our lives. They offer a healing expectation as well as a healing memory. We expect to be like father and grand-father, and we remember being like son and grand-son.

And so expectations and memories touch each other and make it possible to live the whole of life at every moment of our existence. That is the core of all care giving: to be always present to each other. Care giving is the way to the other by which caring community becomes possible. Therefore, caring for the elderly asks for a life style in which the generations are brought into contact with each other in a creative and recreative manner.

Those who are in touch with their own aging might be able to offer the ground where grand-fathers and grand-mothers, fathers and mothers, and daughters, grand-sons and grand-daughters, come and work together to bring forth the fruits of the earth which are given to them. Having stressed that caring for the aging other is not a special type of care, we would now like to describe the two main characteristics of caring for others: acceptance and confrontation.

Acceptance

What does care giving mean when we think of the many people for whom growing old have become a way to the darkness? What is there to say to elderly men and women who feel forgotten and lonely, and who are approaching death as the only way to escape their misery? How do we listen when there are no words of joyous memories, happy events, and growing light? How do we respond to those who feel that all their fears, but none of their hopes, have been fulfilled? There are no easy answers to these questions. There does not seem to be a right reaction or response that fits the occasion. The mystery of failing life is too deep to grasp. But perhaps, while looking into the tired and despairing eyes of the elderly, we might see again what the sacred author saw: "without beauty, without majesty (we saw him), no looks to attract our eyes; a thing despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering, a man to make people screen their faces; he was despised and we took no account of him. And yet ours were the sufferings he bore, ours the sorrows he carried" [1].

Indeed, it is our world which is reflected in the eyes of the elderly, miserable man. Ours were the sufferings he bore, ours the sorrows he carried. The painful suffering of many elderly people which makes their aging into a way to the darkness cannot be understood by pointing to their mistakes, weakness, or sins. By doing so we might avoid the realization that the fate of many elderly people reflects an evil, that is, the evil of a society in which love has been overruled by power and generosity by competition. They are not just suffering for themselves but all of us who are, knowingly or unknowingly, responsible for their condition.

What can we say to the many who have become outcasts of our cruel society? Maybe only that for us who care, their misery can become a warning mirror in which we can see our own insensitive faces. Yet for those who suffer the rejection by their society can lead to the recognition of an acceptance we ourselves have not been able to give. Out of the recognition that life is determined neither by what we did, had, or achieved, nor by one's friends or relatives, nor even by one's own self-understanding, the way might be found to Him whose heart is greater than ours and who says through His own Son, the broken servant: 'You are accepted.'

In the honest and painful recognition of human rejection acceptance can be affirmed. It does not make sense to point to little consoling events in the past which can be held on to. It does not make sense to say: "Yes, I see you are miserable, but look at your happy children, the people you helped the things you left behind." That only increases guilt feelings and denies the reality of the experience of failure. The only hope is in the simple fact that someone who dares to listen and to face failing of life in its naked reality, will not run away but say with a word, a touch, a smile or friendly silence: "I know you had only one life to live and it cannot be lived again, but I am here with you and I care". Maybe in the midst of this darkness, acceptance can be felt through the gentle touch of the one who cares and allows the miserable stranger into his own home [2].

Confrontation

Acceptance is crucial for many elderly people, but it should not be understood as a passive agreement with the facts of life. On the contrary, care is more than helping people to accept their fate. Real care includes -confrontation. Care for the aging and the elderly; after all, means care for all ages, since all human beings whether they are ten, thirty, fifty, seventy, or eighty years old-are participating in the same process of aging. Therefore, caring for the elderly means, more often than not, confronting all men and women with their illusion of immortality of bodily vitality out of which the rejection of old age comes forth.

It is indeed the task of every caregiver to prevent people— young, middle-aged, and the elderly from clinging to false expectations and from building their lives on false suppositions. If it is true that people age the way they live, our first task is to help people discover life styles in which 'being' is not identified with 'having,' self-esteem does not depend on success, and goodness is not the same as popularity.

Caring for the elderly means a persistent refusal to 'attach any kind of ultimate significance to grades, degrees, positions, promotions, or rewards, and the courageous effort to keep men and women in contact with their inner self, where they can experience their own solitude and silence as potential recipients of the light. When one has not discovered and experienced the light that is love, peace, forgiveness, gentleness, kindness, and

deep joy in the early years, how can one expect to recognize it in old age?

Confrontation, by which room is created to allow the light to break into the darkness, is the radical side of care, because it promotes a risky detachment from the concerns of the world and a free manifestation of that love which can change the shape of our society. It not only unmasks the illusions but also makes visible the brightening light that gives us the will to be. Both acceptance and confrontation belong to the family of instruments of effective care giving. Rembrandt not only looked at his own brokenness. He also confronted the people who saw his self-portrait with their own illusions, creating the possibility for the healing light to touch them in their innermost selves.

Caring for the elderly is a sacred duty, which we have lost sight and consciousness of. As it is a sacred duty for the Jews to observe the daily rituals, so too caring for the weak, the sick and the elderly is a sacred duty on account of our being part of the human community. During the golden age of Greece, which is still a model for the world, the Greeks regarded the care of the elderly as a sacred duty, the responsibility rested exclusively with the offspring.

As a matter of fact, Greek law laid down severe penalties for offspring who omitted to discharge their obligation. In Delphi, for instance, anyone who failed to look after her or his elderly member was liable to be put in irons and thrown into prison. In Athens those who neglected either their elderly parents or their grandparents were fined and partially deprived of their citizen rights. There were no public facilities for the elderly - the very idea of an elderly peoples' home would have been utterly alien to the Greeks.

In being human, we have accepted without knowing when, a responsibility that has become a sacred duty such that we cannot overlook this without being guilty of injustice against humanity. The elderly experience in their body a condition which they have not chosen. Life imposes upon them, a fundamental option which they cannot but accept resisting this condition can only bring pain and sorrow. 'When you were young you fastened your belt about you and walk were you chose; but when you are old you will stretch out your arms, and a stranger will bind you fast, and carry you were you have no wish to go.'

Conclusion

There comes a time when our life has passed its meridian, and when the sun is sinking in the sky; it is late afternoon with us. Our powers are not what they were, physical or mental. We cannot walk or work as long, or so well, as we could; we can not think as hard, or remember as easily, or sustain our attention, as long as we once could; we are falling behind those whom we were once before our sons and daughters can do many things better than we can with the peculiar perils of refusing to acknowledge to ourselves or to admit to others the waning of

our power of this hour of life. Life is like a wheel that is new at its first use but gets old with time and constant use. The rolling of the wheel is like the rolling of life that will complete its rolling cycle. We are all aging. The wheel reminds us that the pains of growing old are worthwhile. The wheel turns from ground to ground, but not without moving forward. Aging is the turning of the wheel, the gradual fulfillment of the life cycle in which giving matures in receiving and living makes dying worthwhile.

Aging does not need to be hidden or denied, but can be understood, affirmed, and experienced as a process of growth by which the beauty and mystery of life is slowly revealed to us. It is this sense of hope that we want to strengthen. When aging

can be experienced as a growing by giving, not only of mind and heart, but of life itself, then it can become a movement towards the hour when we can say 'abide with us, for the day is far spent'.

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