

# The Alternative

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Dear Reader,

The topic of this issue, old age, is of special relevance to many readers of this Newsletter. But whatever one's age, the question of elderhood is important as a social question and it will be, probably sooner than one expects, a personal question – if one is lucky enough to avoid the alternative to getting old. This Newsletter includes an excerpt from a wonderful book on aging by Atul Gawande. He did not entitle the book *Being Old* but instead *Being Mortal*. That is, old age is the reminder that a person is mortal from the beginning of life. It is only in old age, however, when it becomes impossible to avoid recognizing one's human mortality.

Also included in this issue is a column from the *New York Times* by David Brooks. It has the surprising theme that the happiest people in the country are in their 80s. Brooks' column drew some loud voices of protest. He would no doubt admit that to speak of averages does not address the fact that many older people live very unhappy lives. Nevertheless, it is helpful for younger people to know that old age is not just a sea of misery for people awaiting death. If one has reasonably good health and sufficient money, old age can be a time of liberation and even new beginnings. Obviously, many people lack one or both of those conditions but health does not have to be perfect and being rich is not necessary.

The essay by Gabriel Moran focuses on the old who live alone. Especially old men who are living alone have a danger of psychic loneliness and a disintegration of simple routines that have been a part of life up to the time that they retired. Women outlive men as any nursing home makes evident. Men are less inclined to admit their dependencies and ask for help. Even men who are rich – perhaps especially men who are rich – are unprepared to take care of themselves when they suddenly discover that they are old.

As the excerpt from Gawande emphasizes, what one needs in old age is a reason for living. Piling up money is a pathetically inadequate way to cope with this need for a purpose in life. Men need to be needed, wrote Erik Erikson, and society still hasn't figured out how to provide an outlet to men who still have the talent and the energy to make a useful contribution to their world.

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## THE WISDOM OF ORDER

By Gabriel Moran

In the United States the population of over-65s is generally doing well. From the condition of being poverty-stricken in the 1960s, old people have become better off than younger people. The average improvement, however, hides some severe problems. Well-educated people who had good jobs are doing very well economically. But people who did not get a college education have a high degree of poverty. Poor people do not live as long as the economically well-off. Proposals in Congress to cut social security and other benefits to the old usually neglect these differences within the population of older citizens.

The problems of old age are distinctly different depending upon whether a person has a partner, has family members in the immediate area, is living in a community, or lives in an isolated setting. I will concentrate on one part of the older population, those who live alone. I leave aside many divisions within that population. I do not try to predict if future generations will have a very different set of advantages and dangers. I speak of the present population of old people.

Old age has always presented problems. We happen to have more old people now and they are living longer and longer. This fact is a cause for rejoicing among those who not long ago would not have been alive. In 1950, children under the age of five were 11 percent off the U.S. population, adults aged forty-five to forty-nine were 6 percent, and those over eighty were 1 percent. Today, we have as many fifty-year-olds as five-year-olds. In thirty years, there will be as many people over eighty as there are under five. The same pattern is emerging throughout the industrialized world.

We cling to the notion of retirement at sixty-five – a reasonable notion when those over sixty-five were a tiny percentage of the population but increasingly untenable as they approach 20 percent. People are putting aside less in savings for old age now than they have at any time since the Great Depression. More than half of the very old now live without a spouse and we have fewer children than ever before, yet we give virtually no thought to how we will live out our later years alone.

The obvious problem of old age is a decline in physical strength. There are people who live into their 90s with no major health problems but the general story of old age is one of vulnerabilities that include illnesses, injuries, and medications. The old who live alone are asserting their ability to take care of themselves and to cope with the ordinary frailties of age. Their determination may be admirable but there can be self-deception in this outlook. It is a responsibility of family and friends to check in on the old who either by choice or necessity are living alone.

Living alone at any age requires a structure to one's daily existence. Some of what is said here about the old also applies to young people who have just moved into their first apartment. They too may have a lack of structure in their daily lives. The problem of

many old people is that their lives have had a firm structure and then it suddenly disappears. The death of a spouse is the most dramatic instance of a person having to reinvent a world of order. People may assume that they know the problem of being a widow or widower but it is difficult to know what that is like before it is experienced. Many widows have written about the change of attitude among their friends; either the widow is treated as an exotic specimen or else she becomes invisible. Order is a “social construct;” a seventy- or eighty-year-old widow should not have to build a new world alone. But millions of people have to do the best they can without strong social support.

The first step for an old person living alone is to recognize that order is a necessity of life. That may seem too obvious for saying but he or she may not recognize that when a structured life has suddenly disappeared a new order has to be built ritual by ritual. The United States has from its beginning been an anti-ritual nation. We take pride in our informality which at times cuts through all kinds of traditional forms that hide reality. But it is unwise to think that human beings do not need habits, rituals, ceremonies, and daily practices. The small rituals that I refer to below may seem trivial but in both manners and morals the rule is to take care of the small things and the big things will generally take care of themselves.

Widows and widowers share the same basic problem but the differences between men and women can be pronounced in this situation. Women seem to cope much better with the problems of old age, in part because women have carried the burden of life's necessities all through their lives. As Margaret Mead used to say, when men retire from work they die but women just keep on cooking. Things may change in future generations but for now there remains a big difference in how most men care for themselves and their surroundings.

Old people who live alone often do not eat well. The problem is not that men do not know how to cook a meal; they can easily learn the minimum skill needed. The real problem is that men, as well as some women, do not see the need for a ritual of cooking a meal just for themselves. After my father died, my mother, who was an excellent cook, was not eating well. When asked about that, her reply was: It is not worth the bother to cook for one.

Eating as well as other basic human practices need rituals that are performed every day. Rituals do not exist if their practice is regularly skipped or routinely violated. No ritual is more important than going to bed and rising at approximately the same times. There is a well-known connection between insomnia and depression; it is not always clear which is cause and which is effect. Being able to get up when the body is rested and to take naps during the day are benefits of old age but the pattern needs consistency.

Personal grooming is often neglected, especially by men. Why shave, shower, or put on clean clothes? Men need to be convinced that such rituals are good for health, happiness and whatever social interactions the day may bring. Dishes left in the sink and a bed unmade are signals that life is not under control.

It is often said that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Millions of people deny this principle by their actions. Some people skip breakfast on the mistaken notion that it is a good way to lose weight. Other people claim to be too busy. Young people who skip breakfast may use the excuse that they need to rush off to work or to school. Retired old people have no such excuse. For the old person living alone there is no excuse for not starting the day with a big, healthy, leisurely breakfast. For people who tend to be slow-moving in the morning it helps to prepare everything needed for breakfast the night before.

In developing a basic routine for the day there are radical differences according to one's economic situation. Having a membership in a gym or exercise clinic is helpful but it is beyond the means of many people. That makes it all the more important to have a regular pattern of physical exercises, starting with daily walks.

For people who are not forced to hold a low-paying job for their economic survival, some kind of volunteer work is usually helpful. "Work" as distinct from job is the contribution that an individual makes to a society. Everyone needs work especially after they retire from their job.

Everyone also needs beauty in their surroundings. The rich can easily afford beautiful things although they are often too dull to appreciate simple, beautiful things. Whatever the limitations of one's budget, it is important that one's immediate surroundings have aesthetic touches for the walls, shelves, and entrance to one's apartment. Whatever one's ear for music, everyone's life is helped by the kind of music that he or she can appreciate.

Music is the natural companion to silence. An old person living alone has long stretches where there is no conversation with others. The absence of sound does not automatically create a calm, meditative silence. One has to learn how to appreciate silence as the gift of a life separated from the noise and hyperactivity of today's world. C.S. Lewis describes heaven as the place "where all that is not music will be silence."

An old man living alone may forget to smile and to have a pleasant expression when confronting others. Preoccupied with minor aches and pains he might seem to be a grumpy old guy when in fact he has simply become unaccustomed to smiling. A positive outlook on life is actually good for one's health in addition to having a soothing effect in social contacts. Laughter is good medicine as Norman Cousins documented in his *Anatomy of an Illness*. Good humor does not cost anything; it just requires an attention to the face that one turns toward the world.

As Aristotle said in his *Ethics*, no one would wish to live without friends. The older that one gets the more cherished are long friendships. Family members who have been occupied with their own family and work often rediscover family bonds late in life. All friendships require cultivation. Women seem better at maintaining a few close friends across the decades, something men have to work at.

The cell phone, e-mail and other exotic machinery are a great boon to old people who live alone; many of the old are struggling to become familiar with today's technology. There is no reason why, with just a little help, they cannot use these means of communication to their benefit. If it is possible for the old person, going out to dinner or a movie, especially with a companion but even alone, is a healthy element to include in a weekly routine.

Some people in their seventies or eighties are not content to settle into living alone. They may be looking for a new partner. Why not? Their behavior may be upsetting to their children; the old are often liberated in a way that scandalizes the middle-aged. The closest ally for an old person is often a teenage grandchild. Teenagers know the experience of rebelling against the people in charge.

The children of the old should, of course, be listened to. They may have legitimate concerns. Some people are shocked to discover that there is a lot of unprotected sex these days in nursing homes. Young people may suspect that their dad is just looking for someone to take care of him. Or it may seem that an older woman is too quick to jump at the chance of financial security. Ultimately, the old have to find their own way with the help of family and friends. The middle-aged son or daughter is not the parent.

In today's world the old have greater possibilities than at any time in the past. Except for people in poverty, there is easy access to food and drink; there is a world of entertainment at one's finger tips. There are medicines that can ease the pains of old age. Without some rituals of order, however, benefits can become dangers. Television, which now spills beyond the television set, is a great pacifier of children and the old but too much of it saps one's vitality.

Having a glass of wine at dinner is a delight though alcohol is one of the silent dangers of old age. A person living alone does not have a built-in ritual setting for the use of alcohol; the result is that there is no place to stop when one drink follows another. The rate of alcoholism among old people is a serious but mostly hidden problem. For the person who eats and drinks alone, it is imperative to have a ritual that makes sense for that person.

To most of the suggestions above, the reader's response may be: That is obvious; everyone knows that. The problem is that, without a strong conviction about the need for order formed by daily rituals, obvious things fall into disuse.

The old person living alone is a person who can feel that he or she no longer has an identity. The old person needs to re-create not an entirely new identity but a new way of being the person that he or she has been. It is not a mechanical or robotic process. There can be a wonderful sense of liberation in old age when one can drop most of life's pretensions and simply be a self that respects the wisdom of the past and is open to learning from every possible source in the present.

Especially after a serious illness, the old person knows that every day is a bonus.

## WHY ELDERS SMILE

By David Brooks

A few months ago, Ezekiel Emanuel had an essay in *The Atlantic* saying that, all things considered, he'd prefer to die around age 75. He argued that he'd rather clock out with all his powers intact than endure a sad, feeble decline. The problem is that if Zeke dies at 75, he'll likely be missing his happiest years. When researchers ask people to assess their own well-being, people in their 20s rate themselves highly. Then there's a decline as people get sadder in middle age, bottoming out around age 50. But then happiness levels shoot up, so that old people are happier than young people. The people who rate themselves most highly are those ages 82 to 85.

Psychologists who study this now famous U-Curve tend to point out that old people are happier because of changes in the brain. For example, when you show people a crowd of faces, young people unconsciously tend to look at the threatening faces but older people's attention gravitates toward the happy ones. Older people are more relaxed, on average. They are spared some of the burden of thinking about the future. As a result, they get more pleasure out of present, ordinary activities.

My problem with a lot of the research on happiness in old age is that it is so deterministic. It treats the aging of the emotional life the way you might treat the aging of the body: as this biological, chemical and evolutionary process that happens to people. I'd rather think that elder happiness is an accomplishment, not a condition, and that people get better at living through effort by mastering specific skills.

I'd like to think that people get steadily better at handling life's challenges. In middle age, they are confronted by stressful challenges they can't control, like having teenage children. But, in old age, they have more control over the challenges they will tackle and they get even better at addressing them.

Aristotle teaches us that being a good person is not mainly about learning moral rules and following them. It is about performing social roles well — being a good parent or teacher or lawyer or friend.

It's easy to think of some of the skills that some people get better at over time. First, there's bifocalism, the ability to see the same situation from multiple perspectives. Anthony Kronman of Yale Law School once wrote, "Anyone who has worn bifocal lenses knows that it takes time to learn to shift smoothly between perspectives and to combine them in a single field of vision. The same is true of deliberation. It is difficult to be compassionate, and often just as difficult to be detached, but what is most difficult of all is to be both at once." Only with experience can a person learn to see a fraught situation both close up with emotional intensity, and far away with detached perspective.

Then there's lightness, the ability to be at ease with the downsides of life. In their book, "Lighter as We Go," Jimmie Holland and Mindy Greenstein (who is a friend from college) argue that while older people lose memory they also learn that most setbacks are

not the end of the world. Anxiety is the biggest waste in life. If you know that you'll recover, you can save time and get on with it sooner. "The ability to grow lighter as we go is a form of wisdom that entails learning how not to sweat the small stuff, learning how not to be too invested in particular outcomes."

Then there is the ability to balance tensions. In "Practical Wisdom," Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe argue that performing many social roles means balancing competing demands. A doctor has to be honest but also kind. A teacher has to instruct but also inspire. You can't find the right balance in each context by memorizing a rule book. This form of wisdom can only be earned by acquiring a repertoire of similar experiences.

Finally, experienced heads have intuitive awareness of the landscape of reality, a feel for what other people are thinking and feeling, an instinct for how events will flow. In "The Wisdom Paradox," Elkhonon Goldberg details the many ways the brain deteriorates with age: brain cells die, mental operations slow. But a lifetime of intellectual effort can lead to empathy and pattern awareness. "What I have lost with age in my capacity for hard mental work," Goldberg writes, "I seem to have gained in my capacity for instantaneous, almost unfairly easy insight."

It's comforting to know that, for many, life gets happier with age. But it's more useful to know how individuals get better at doing the things they do. The point of culture is to spread that wisdom from old to young; to put that thousand-year-heart in a still young body.

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## BEING MORTAL

By Atul Gawande

In 1908, A Harvard philosopher named Josiah Royce wrote a book with the title *The Philosophy of Loyalty*. Royce was not concerned with the trials of aging. He was concerned with a puzzle that is fundamental to anyone contemplating his or her mortality. Royce wanted to understand why simply existing – why being merely housed and fed and safe and alive – seems empty and meaningless to us. What more is it that we need in order that life is worthwhile?

The answer, he believed, is that we all seek a cause beyond ourselves. This was to him, an intrinsic human need. The cause could be large (family, country, principle) or small (a building project, the care of a pet). The important thing was that, in ascribing value to the cause and seeing it as worth making sacrifices for, we give our lives meaning.

Royce called this dedication to a cause beyond oneself loyalty. He regarded it as the opposite of individualism. The individualist puts self-interest first, seeing his own pain, pleasure, and existence as his greatest concern. For an individualist, loyalty to causes that have nothing to do with self-interest is strange. When such loyalty encourages self-sacrifice, it can even be alarming – a mistaken and irrational tendency that leaves people open to the exploitation of tyrants. Nothing could matter more than self-interest, and because when you die you are gone, self-sacrifice makes no sense.

Royce had no sympathy for the individualist view. “The selfish we had always with us,” he wrote. “But the divine right to be selfish was never more ingeniously defended.” In fact, he argued, human beings need loyalty. It does not necessarily produce happiness, and can even be painful, but we all require devotion to something more than ourselves for our lives to be enduring. Without it, we have only our desires to guide us, and they are fleeting, capricious, and insatiable.

Consider the fact that we care deeply about what happens to the world after we die. If self-interest were the primary source of meaning in life, then it wouldn't matter to people if an hour after their death everyone they know were to be wiped from the face of the earth. Yet it matters greatly to most people. We feel that such an occurrence would make our lives meaningless.

The only way death is not meaningless is to see yourself as part of something greater: a family, a community, a society. If you don't, mortality is only a horror. But if you do, it is not. Loyalty, said Royce, “solves the paradox of our ordinary existence by showing us outside of ourselves the cause which is to be served, and inside of ourselves the will which delights to do this service, and which is not thwarted but enriched and expressed in such service.” In more recent times, psychologists have used the term “transcendence” for a version of this idea. They suggest the existence in people of a transcendent desire to see and help other beings achieve their potential.

As our time winds down, we all seek comfort in simple pleasures – companionship, everyday routines, the taste of good food, the warmth of sunlight on our faces. We become less interested in the rewards of achieving and accumulating and more interested in the rewards of simply being. Yet while we may feel less ambitious, we also become concerned for our legacy. And we have a deep need to identify purposes outside ourselves that make living feel meaningful and worthwhile.

The problem with medicine and the institutions it has spawned for the care of the sick and the old is not that they have had an incorrect view of what makes life significant. The problem is that they have had almost no view at all. Medicine's focus is narrow. Medical professionals concentrate on repair of health, not sustenance of the soul. Yet – and this is the painful paradox – we have decided they should be the ones who largely define how we live in our waning days.

For more than half a century now, we have treated the trials of sickness, aging, and mortality as medical concerns. It's been an experiment in social engineering, putting our fates in the hands of people who are valued more for their technical prowess than for their understanding of human needs.

The experiment has failed. If safety and protection were all we sought in life, perhaps we could conclude differently. But because we seek a life of worth and purpose, and yet are routinely denied the conditions that might make it possible, there is no other way to see what modern society has done.