

OLD MEN LIVING ALONE

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 of 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 now are putting aside less in savings for old age 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. Jane Brody quotes a physician who says to a 70 year old: “All my patients your age who do not have any aches and pains are dead.” 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 lack 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 the situation 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 are able to 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 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 a job is the contribution that an individual makes to a society. Everyone needs work especially after they retire from their job. It is also helpful for an old person to learn some new skill that presents a new challenge and requires steady application.

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 smoothing 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.

Larry David has said: "The average age of my friends is deceased." That is the somewhat fortunate problem of those who live long. But the absence of friends can be a big problem. 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.