

Where To Begin?: Facing the Challenges of Aging Within Our Community

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Priscilla tells me that her paternal grandfather, Grandpa Rae, who lived to age 96 had this saying: “Gettin’ Older Ain’t For Sissies”. And I think he got it right. That is why today it is my hope that we can begin a conversation on the subject of aging within our Shalom Church Community. Tom’s challenges with Parkinson’s disease, Max and Galen’s illnesses and deaths, Janice's father's emerging needs, and most recently Gertrude’s hip replacement are all reminders that such a conversation is relevant, if not long overdue.

This is particularly so, if we consider that life expectancy has dramatically increased within the United States over the past century. Government data show that life expectancy for the total population has reached an on average age of 77.5 years, up from 49.2 years at the turn of the 20th century. In fact, the fastest demographic proportionally according to US census data are centenarians, those individuals age 100 and older.

One thing is clear, more and more of us will live to become very old people and this will create many new challenges both for us as individuals and for the government programs that were designed to support us during our retirement years. Such challenges, in fact, fuel much of the current debate surrounding the viability of entitlement programs like Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, the effectiveness of employer retirement saving plans, not to mention the palpable fears created by rapidly rising health care costs and the prospect of long term care needs.

But I am not here today to talk about the risk that we as individuals or our government entitlement programs or our community, for that matter, have of *running out of money* --- instead I would like to direct my comments to the risk that we as individuals have of *running out of hope and a sense of self worth* as we age, and what our community can possibly do about it. And, as it turns out, running out of hope and a sense of self worth as we get older can occur whether we are under financial stress or not.

As a case in point, I would like to take a few minutes to share some of my mother's story with you. I am pleased she is with us this morning and grateful that she has agreed to let her story be part of this talk.

If you were to have known my mother when I was a child, you would have observed a sharp witted women; a women with a keen intellect and a wonderful sense of humor. You would have seen her as vital and independent person, who for 25 years was a highly regarded kindergarten teacher. You would have known her as the loving mother of four boys, who so successfully imbued values of service and education in her four sons that two of them became surgeons, another a gastroenterologist, leaving me to become the sole attorney in the family. Suffice it to say, that along with my Dad, my Mom worked hard and had much to be proud of, and with a good school teacher's pension, she entered into retirement financially and emotionally secure – a happy person.

But this did not last. As my mother has aged, she has needed greater support from others, which in turn has eroded her self confidence and the self esteem she once possessed. While at one time she could run the family's financial affairs on her own, she at some point needed others to balance her checkbook. Then came the time when she was unable to organize and administer her own daily medications, and with my Father's passing she experienced the loss of her key support person and came to live

with us. Today, at age 83, and with an increased need for care giving due to dementia, my mother now fights off feelings of being in her own words “a bother and a burden” and continues to communicate her desire, from time to time, that “*it would all just be over with already*”. Where is the Dignity in such feelings? Where is the “Aging with Grace” that we all are hopeful for?

So I have asked myself why my mother feels the way she does today and upon reflection, concluded, that part of what she feels is not just based on a mindset unique and idiosyncratic to her, but on socio-cultural beliefs and values that many of us indeed share and need to better understand, as we approach a more needy phase of our lives.

Consider the following value statement, for example:

“Valued members of society are productive and independent individuals who not only take care of themselves, but render service to others”.

Let me repeat this:

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On its face, this value statement seems benign enough. Who would object to the idea that being productive and independent and offering

service to others are all good qualities? But such good qualities I would argue should not be the litmus test we apply to our aging seniors. At some point, we need to shift the lens through which we see such a value proposition, so that as we age, we don't feel diminished by the deterioration of our bodies and inability to fully function without the aid of others. At some point we need to transition our perspective, so that neediness is an acceptable part of our community conversation; so that our elderly are indeed encouraged to recognize their need for help, be open to asking for it , and be willing to receive it guilt free.

Let me repeat the value statement: "Valued members of society are productive and independent individuals who not only take care of themselves, but render service to others".

Upon closer inspection, this statement, in fact, is terrible flawed when applied to our elderly.

First, with regard to *productivity* as a value, while suitable perhaps a value we impart to our children, let me ask this question as it pertains to our elderly: *is it our ongoing productivity or the body of our life work* that we

want to measure ourselves against as we age? In other words, since the sheer volume of our energy and capacity predictably wanes in our later years, should the level of our productivity even be a serious factor in how we view ourselves as sayan octogenarian ? I suggest not.

Secondly, while we talk to our young adults about the value of independence, are we ever truly and absolutely independent in our lives? Instead, a more accurate and apt characterization of our relationship with others at all stages of our life I suggest is one of *interdependence*.

We purchase food from others who have done the planting and the harvesting, we buy cars from others who have done the engineering and the manufacturing, we go doctors who have done the medical study, and put new roofs on our home, by hiring roofers... And so on and son...

So how is it that we sustain this notion of independence as a cherished value in our society, which turns out to haunt us in latter years when we then are deemed “dependents” ?

I would suggest that our interdependence is often masked when we pay for various products and services from strangers and/or companies, since it is easier to dismiss these “transactional relationships” with others as something other than a form interdependence. And rather than recognizing our ongoing

interdependence with others at all stages in our lives, we seek to embrace the illusion that we are more secure if we can do it on our own.

So when does this illusion begin to break down, you might ask? The illusion of independence breaks down, it seems to me, when our needs become ongoing, and more private, even intimate in nature. And for our elderly this often occurs when help is now needed with activities of daily living such as dressing, toileting, showering, ambulating, eating, administering our daily medications or simply operating the cable remote. Such needs are not currently viewed in our communities and by society at large as merely new forms of interdependency – they instead are viewed as an unwanted dependency on others and by the recipients of such help often as sign of personal failure. Is this the way we want to experience our need for help as we age? Is the private hell experienced by certain aging members of our community merely that ---a private matter for the individual and their own families to contend with? Or is there another way? Can Shalom do better than this? And if so, how?

This leads me to my third and final point. If we as individuals and as a community are to better manage the dilemma of aging together, we must expand our *notion of service*. For aging individuals in need of other's help, service must be redefined in new ways. *Instead of being the direct provider of services to others, in fact, one must also be learn how to derive some value and sense of self worth as the recipient of another's intended service.*

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But how does such a shift in attitude occur and how do we as a community encourage the development of it? In part, I would argue, it begins with one's faith. What I mean by this is that if we recognize that arc of our life, from beginning to end is actually incredibly brief, we can remind ourselves that our existence is less to do with ourselves, and more to do with fulfilling the purpose that God has for us in this lifetime – a purpose that is present right up until our last breath. The genuine neediness of our elderly, therefore, can emerge as a new form of service, allowing others to do a portion of their life's service work.

This has certainly proved to be the case for me, Priscilla, and Isaac. In the past three years that my Mother has lived with us, my Mother's neediness has afforded our family the opportunity to serve and be served. And in a true interdependent way, we have been a beneficiary of whatever service we have in fact rendered.--- we have grown together because of the experience, learned patience together, and learned about our capacity for compassion. In this way Mom, you have serve us and while at times you may feel like a "bother and a burden" to us, we in fact have experienced an interdependent relationship all along, and one that has involved mutual service.

It is through expanding of the notion of service then, it seems to me, that an aging person like my Mom will more likely learn to to ask for and receive help from others, while still retaining a sense of dignity and purpose in their lives.

So where does a faith based community like Shalom Community Church fit into all of this? I think that it is through our community that individuals can be encouraged to share their needs openly and accept help

offered by other's in the community. It through our community that a task force can examine the ongoing needs of our elderly and consider how to better serve them. It is through our community that God's plan for us can both be explored and pursued. And it is through our Shalom Community that new and expanded notions of service can be talked about and supported.

Let me conclude by saying that the aging that is taking place within our ranks involves complex matters and is worthy of a conversation within our Shalom Community. Let's begin this conversation, in fact, today, knowing that it will not end here, but perhaps will start us on a path.

In the next few minutes, see if there is something you might like to share on the subject or a suggestion on where and how we might begin this journey together. As you are thinking about what to say, let me pose some questions to consider and after a brief sharing of say 10 minutes or so, I will have concluding remark.

Here are some questions we might ask ourselves as a starting point:

Are the problems related to our aging within the Shalom Community a private or a public problem?

Should the community be prepared to offer any type of counsel or provide resources to assist our elderly?

Should the Shalom Community seek to educate its members and participants of various types of resources available outside our community?

Should the Community have an elderly ombudsman or a patient advocate in its ranks to help with health and/or hospitalization matters?

Should we provide as a community provide ongoing meals for our elders?

Or have a means of supporting dialy “check ins” ?

What role should our pastor play in attending to these needs?

FINAL REMARK:

Thanks to all of you for listening and for participating with your comments.

This is a conversation that will have to develop over many months and perhaps years, but this I am confident of -- with the intelligence, love, and resourcefulness that exists within our Shalom Community, we will not shy away from addressing the issues related to our aging population and we will devise creative solutions to the challenges we are now starting to face.

Thanks you affording me this time before you.

