

EDITORIAL • The Very Old? They reveal all of us

“C’est dans le miroir des autres que, parfois, on se reconnaît.”

– Jacques Prevert (1)

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I write to describe the theme that old people, and particularly very old people, are, in the sense of the French lines quoted above, mirrors that reflect us, and in which reflections we can come to recognize ourselves.

This idea is far from obvious, far also, from enjoying anything approaching widespread acceptance. Quite the contrary! More widespread, and so frequently unspoken, is the assumption that very old people are vastly different from the rest of us. This silent and uncriticized assumption, most powerful in its effects on perceptions and behaviours regarding the aged, is that the very old are not really “one of us.” Oh, we rarely come right out and so brutally say that. Yet, public talk and public policies about the aged, and the de facto abandonment of so many very old people to their loneliness, really do echo, I think, Sylvia Plath’s chilling declaration in the final line of her poem, *Medusa*, “There is nothing between us.” (2)

I write to reject this governing assumption and its echo, regarding the aged and the very old, of Plath’s declaration. I write to amplify the truth that the aged and very old people are so intimately bound to us that without them we cannot come to recognize who we really are, or to realize who we can become, either as a fulfilment or as a betrayal of ourselves. The very old reveal us in at least three senses of this title’s “all of us.” They reveal each of us; they reveal the most important things about each of us; and they reveal us as an “all”; as a community in strength or as a community in disintegration; as a society of growing humanity or as a society that has been, or is in danger of being, sacrificed to its economy.

Why This Editorial Now?

I decided to write this editorial *now* for two immediate reasons. First, the steadily growing population imbalance between the aged and the young, with the numbers of the elderly growing faster than the numbers of younger people, is calling

forth shrill cries of consternation, if not panic. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), in a recent report, stated that the costs associated with aging in the Group of G-20 countries are 10 times greater than the costs of the current financial crisis. The report is cited as stating that the exorbitant costs of supporting aging societies are breathing down the necks of governments. The article on the IMF report cites a U.S. economist as calling the growing population of the aged “the new Malthusian nightmare.” (3) The growing numbers of the aged and the very old, we hear loud and clear, are exerting enormous economic pressures on governments and societies. In these times of panicky concern about economic solvency, I write about the rising threats of human and moral insolvency; an insolvency that could slowly, steadily, and surely wheelchair the aged and the very old out onto the far margins of society and into its deepest shadows.

Plans, now under way, for the reform of long-term care in the province of Quebec also drive me to write this editorial now.

A year ago, in an editorial titled, “Raging Prayers for the Aged,” (4) I cited the story of the 91-year-old Mrs. Palet Iourovskaia, who had to move from nursing home to nursing home three times in three months. I cited this story from Charlie Fidelman’s newspaper article, “Bed Shortage Keeps Seniors on the Move.” (5) I wrote prayers of rage against the dying of our sight, and of our insight into, the abject misery of old men and woman who are wheelchaired from one loneliness to another because there are no longer enough places for them on this Earth and in its healthcare systems. No room for them, these very old people, just corridors of transition where they are parked until the next transfer to another corridor.

And now “transition existence” threatens, in the Quebec reform of long-term care, to become the closing existence of the aged and the very old.

The understandable goal of this reform is to increase the numbers of sorely needed hospital beds for the acutely ill. All of the more than 700 long-term care beds in the Montreal region, currently occupied by the aged, will be closed and the aged will be moved out of hospital short-term care beds within 72 hours of having their physical condition stabilized. The aged and the very old will pass through three moves: first, to “evaluation beds” for about three months; second, to “transition beds” for about three months; and, finally, to a permanent long-term care residence “of their choice.”

However, there are currently 3,700 old people awaiting a place in a hospital centre for long-term care in the Montreal region. (6, 7)

Voices are starting to rise to decry this triple move element of the reform plan as humanly intolerable for the aged and their relatives. (8-10) Will our humanity towards the very old disappear in the black hole between the theory of such reform plans and their practical reality? I fear so, and this is another reason for this editorial.

What Do the Very Old Reveal about Me?

It would be utterly presumptuous of me to try to answer what the very old reveal about all of us. More modestly, I shall try to do what I have never done before: to express something of what the very old reveal to me about myself. I think the very old reveal to me:

- That I try not to look at them, or to be near them, or to speak to them because they show me in too frightening a way what I will look like and be like if I live long enough.
- That I feel guilty for having this anxiety and for so comfortably assuming that I am really helpless to do anything effective to relieve the abandonment and the deep loneliness of so many very old people.
- That I am superficial and heartless, as I was the other day when I walked by a very old Chinese woman in her wheelchair; walked by without meeting her eye when I knew she was watching me closely.

- That I am haughty and vain when I stride past the many very old people in the hospital next to the research centre where I work; stride by, I do, quickly and barely conscious of my prideful feelings about how strong, vigorous, and attractive I am compared to these fragile, wheelchair-bound old people.
- That I am hypocritical for treating very old people as utter strangers when I have already written many times that humanity is the place where no one who suffers and is alone will ever be a stranger to us.
- That I am quite comfortable and self-satisfied writing about leadership, as I have done several times and again recently, (11) and that I am altogether too lazy and neglectful to stand up, move, and exercise leadership on behalf of the aged and the very old.

These are a few of the things that very old people reveal to me about myself. I so hope that I am alone in my inhumanity toward the very old. Do you think that I am?

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– David J. Roy, Editor-in-Chief

