The Eden Alternative

The Three Plagues

In the early 1990s, I took a job as a physician in a small nursing home in upstate New York. The facility had a proud history of compliance with state and federal regulations and was, in every way, a credit to the community. At one point, it boasted five consecutive "perfect" state inspection surveys. It had everything such a facility could ask for—a modern, well-maintained building; a thoughtful and committed board of directors; and a dedicated staff and management team, many with long tenure. There were just three problems at the nursing home:

- Loneliness
- Helplessness
- Boredom

My eyes were opened to these plagues one day when I was asked to see a woman about a rash that had developed on her arm. Accompanied by a nurse, I strode down the hallway, confident that I could diagnose the cause of the inflammation. I found my patient lying in her bed in the very sparely furnished room that she shared with another resident. I pulled the curtain aside and presented myself in what I supposed was a very friendly, confident way. In a too-loud voice I questioned her about the red splotches on her arm, how long they had been there, whether they itched, and if she had ever had

such a rash in the past. When I prepared to leave, she reached up and took hold of my arm and pulled me toward her. I will never forget the whiteness of her hair and the blueness of her eyes. In a soft, sad voice she said, "I'm so lonely."

At first I could not answer. Nothing in my training or experience had prepared me for this. I clumsily excused myself and staggered back to the nurses' station. There I wrote a medical note documenting my visit and prescribing the appropriate cream. I finished my rounds and left the facility—but those eyes, that face, that voice would not leave my mind. Indeed, they are with me still, even to this day.

When I returned to the nursing home I was determined to understand the true causes of suffering among the people I called my patients. I quickly came to see that the three plagues of loneliness, helplessness, and boredom were tormenting these people. The plagues were relentless, remorseless, and too often fatal. Despite this, the organization devoted very few of its resources to alleviating them. Such passivity was hard for me to comprehend, given how committed the facility was to quality care and how seriously these afflictions were harming the people who lived there. My distress was gradually tempered by the understanding that the harm was being done in spite of the best efforts of the people who were working there. The true culprit was the system of long-term care itself. The ideal of mitigated aging was leading staff to "help the residents compensate for their losses." This was a near-perfect description of the medical model of care, and it was blinding everyone to the very urgent needs of the human spirit.

Together with my wife, Judith Meyers-Thomas, I began thinking about creating a different kind of world for people living in nursing homes. The Eden Alternative is the product of that effort. It was created as a response to the withering toll that institutionalization takes on people who must live in nursing homes. Although we had no sense of it at the time, the Eden Alternative, together with a variety of other innovations and philosophies, would later become part of a sustained effort to change the culture of long-term care.

The Eden Alternative (described fully in a book I wrote called *Life Worth Living)* acknowledges that the bulk of the suffering expe-

rienced by those confined to long-term care environments is due to the plagues of loneliness, helplessness, and boredom. The Eden Alternative's response to this suffering proceeds from the rather ordinary observation that human beings thrive in gardenlike environments. This is one of the lessons of the original story of Eden. A nursing home, dedicated as it is to combating physical and mental disease and disability, is particularly inept when it comes to confronting the wounds of the human spirit. Careful study of each of the three plagues led us to identify and then develop effective antidotes.

Loneliness vs. Companionship

A lonely person needs companionship the way a thirsty person needs water. Companionship is one of the essential ingredients of well-being, yet we pay it little mind. It is too often confused with friendship or even passive participation in group activities. In fact, companionship is the product of knowing and being with others. We are not the companions of people seated near us on a flight to Los Angeles because we do not (and may not want to) know them. Similarly, our best old friends from high school, while still dear to us, are not our companions because we no longer share the rhythms of daily life with them. The professional staff of a nursing home may well take pride in how well they know "their" residents, but they offer little in the way of companionship because they have so little time to *be with* the elders. The cult of adulthood demands that staff members always remain busy, and so it structures human relationships around the routines required to ensure that work gets done. Long-term care encourages friendliness in the place of true companionship.

The Eden Alternative shows people how to integrate knowing and being into the daily rhythms of life in long-term care settings. Whereas the medical model stresses the idea of "professional distance," Eden helps people develop meaningful relationships with each other by teaching them how to learn and understand each other's stories. The art of giving care depends on companionship to give the care depth and substance. Without companionship, long-term care can offer only the cruel comfort of strangers feeding, bathing, dressing, and entertaining strangers.

A frequent objection in the long-term care industry is that the staff members of any given nursing home are so busy that, no matter how motivated they may be, they cannot provide all the companionship that lonely elders need. I agree and am relieved to report that help is nearby. Humans and animals have been living together for millennia, and those relationships have added immeasurably to the quality of human life. I have often asked people in the audiences I address to raise their hands if they have had experience with companion animals in their lives. Nearly every hand goes up. The beauty of the human-animal bond is that it is capable of providing round-the-clock unconditional love and affection. "Visiting animal" programs are nice but don't solve the need for ongoing companionship. Florence Nightingale made the same observation 150 years ago. Writing about the role of the nurse in facilitating recovery from illness, she observed that companion animals had a natural place in the sick room and could do much to alleviate the loneliness that came with a long convalescence.

Helplessness vs. Opportunities to Give Care

Nursing homes are academies of helplessness. The buildings themselves, ostensibly designed to foster long-term care, actually disable the people who live there. The most ordinary elements of self-care—eating, bathing, and dressing—are taken out of the residents' hands and given over to paid staff members. Being made to feel helpless is an unintended and too often unnoticed consequence of life in an institution.

The logic of long-term care consistently violates the deep-seated human need to balance the giving and receiving of care. People are trapped in a situation in which they receive far more care than they give. This imbalance inevitably leads to helplessness. The Eden Alternative teaches how to provide elders with easy access to opportunities to care. One of the great virtues of companion animals is that they require daily care, their needs are far less complex than those of children. In the Eden Alternative, we have to receive

to wake each morning and know, in truth, that their life matters—that they are in some way contributing to the well-being of another.

The people who work in nursing homes are expected to perform feats that would have fatigued Hercules. They are asked to give care all day, every day—even when the organization fails to care for them. Giving care every day without being cared for every day is a prescription for frustration, cynicism, and ultimately failure. Perhaps the most important part of our work when "Edenizing" a facility lies in teaching members of the management how to rebuild their relationships with the staff. The people who work in long-term care are some of the biggest-hearted, most loving and giving people I have ever known. The tragedy is that they are trapped in a system that defines care in terms of treatment, and caregiving in terms of tasks. The Eden Alternative teaches long-term care organizations that imbalances in the giving and receiving of care are as dangerous to the organization as red ink on the financial statement. Successful Edenizing organizations are constantly exploring the art of cherishing and being cherished.

Boredom vs. Variety and Spontaneity

Boredom is a great crushing weight that can squeeze the life out of any human being. It is the pain we suffer when we seek but cannot find variety and spontaneity in daily life. Because nursing homes are operated as therapeutic institutions, machinelike efficiency is their ideal. The best facilities are thought to be those that deviate to the minimum extent possible from predetermined schedules and routines. Inside the organization, the people who are most adept at maintaining routine and order are promoted into management positions where they are consistently rewarded for suppressing variety and spontaneity.

This approach to daily life has a deadening effect on all who must live and work under its sway. Everyone needs to feel the fresh breeze of the unexpected, even if it does not blow every day. Spontaneous events and happenings are the source of interesting conversation. Conversations grow into stories that can be told and retold. Stories become memories. To live in a typical nursing home is to endure a famine of new memories. By choosing to model daily life in the nurs-

ing home on a life-giving garden such as the bib
Eden, we can reverse some of the most grievous
and work within an institution.

Because it is intended to function as a
Edenizing long-term care organization embra
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Making a New Culture

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Beginning with the idea that elders should decide helps us hear their voices. When elders cannot decide, those closest to them—those most aware of their stories, their likes and dislikes—should make the decisions.

One reason the conventional approach to management in long-term care is so dangerous is that it moves decision-making authority too far away from the elders. This disenfranchisement is rarely questioned and, in truth, is just one of the many levels of disempowerment that can be found within the institution. Residents will have little opportunity to become the elders they are meant to be until we remake the relationship between management and staff. Our work in the Eden Alternative has led us to accept, as an ironclad law, the observation that "as managers do unto staff, so shall the staff do unto the elders." An organization that learns to give love, respect, dignity, tenderness, and tolerance to employees creates the potential for these same virtues to be provided, in abundance, to the elders. A commitment to fairness that values this reciprocity is the most elemental form of justice.

While the Eden Alternative began as an effort to improve the physical environment in which nursing home residents were living, it quickly became clear that the social environment had an even greater impact on the well-being of staff and residents. What we think about one another and how we treat one another are ways of being that form the bedrock of daily life; they certainly define the quality of life for people who live and work in long-term care facilities. We learned slowly and painfully that the Eden Alternative flourishes only when creative, courageous leadership that is truly dedicated to this difficult work remains committed to the process.

By the late 1990s it had become clear that the Eden Alternative was part of a larger emerging struggle to remake the daily realities of long-term care for staff and residents alike. Other people, such as Barry and Debbie Barkan of the Live Oak Institute, Charlene Boyd at Providence Mount St. Vincent, and Joanne Rader at the University of Oregon, were also pioneering new approaches to the problems faced by those living in and working in nursing homes. It is often said, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." The field

was ripe for change and more open than ever before
practices. What was needed was some kind of proof
change the culture of long-term care could offer m
able improvements in the quality of life and the

Outcomes and Ideals

As a follow-up to the research conducted du
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wide, is enormous. Training a single replacement caregiver costs approximately $3,000. In the state of Michigan, studies have found that the annualized turnover rate for nurse's assistants is 72 percent. Thus, nurse's assistant turnover in a typical 120-bed nursing facility costs about $210,000 a year. Significantly, Edenizing homes report reductions in staff turnover rates and improved attendance among employees. This trend not only strengthens the financial performance of the nursing home; it also improves the care provided to the elders. Consistent staff-elder relationships have been shown to increase the satisfaction of both elders and their caregivers. Some examples of this trend at work are the following:

- Lapeer County Medical Care Facility (CMCF) in Lapeer, Michigan, began its Eden journey in 2000 and became a registered Eden home in 2001. It has reported a 75 percent decrease in staff turnover as well as a 60 percent decline in absenteeism.
- Oak Crest Manor of Holland, Michigan, also launched its Eden journey in 2000. Since then it has reported a decrease in staff turnover from 104 percent to 42 percent in just eighteen months. The cost of using outside agency staff plummeted from $60,435 in 2000 to just $247 in the following two years combined.
- Lakeland Specialty Hospital in Berrien Center, Michigan, started to Edenize in 1999 and was named to the Eden Alternative registry in 2001. The facility reports the reduction of staff turnover from 87 percent in 1999 to 33 percent in 2001. The use of outside agency staffing has been eliminated.
- Leelanau Memorial Health Center in Northport, Michigan, started its Eden journey in 1996 and became a registered Eden home in 1998. It experienced a decrease in turnover from 72 percent in 1997 to 17 percent in 2001. Staff absenteeism over the same period improved from 451 call-ins to 276 call-ins in 2001.
- Lenawee CMCF in Adrian, Michigan, began its Eden journey in 1998 and became a registered Eden h[illegible]

> retention rates have climbed from 58 percent to 78 percent, allowing the organization to keep experienced caregivers, which, in turn, leads to improved care.

The Eden Alternative provides a framework for culture change in long-term care. Its principles and practices nourish a relationship-rich environment in which elders and staff can continue to grow and learn together. Homes that embrace the Eden Alternative and take on the difficult work of culture change enjoy many positive results. Numerous surveys have shown improved elder, family, and staff satisfaction. More fulfilled staff and happier elders lead to improved quality indicators and lower turnover among staff who provide the care.

The Eden Alternative has grown in size, scope, and complexity since its inception in 1992. What began as an effort to improve the quality of life for residents in a single nursing home has developed into a worldwide movement to reform the structures and practices of long-term care as a whole. The Eden Alternative has labored to develop a comprehensive approach to change in long-term care, complete with its own language, stories, and fellowship. The Eden Alternative philosophy has been implemented successfully in every state of the Union and in New Zealand, Australia, Europe, and Asia. There are two factors that help explain its global success. First, in the industrialized world (both East and West), the problems created by a growing reliance on institutional forms of care are largely the same from nation to nation. Institutionalized elders everywhere suffer from the three plagues of loneliness, helplessness, and boredom. Second, no matter what language is spoken within their walls, long-term care facilities the world over all answer to the dictates of the cult of adulthood and its attendant theology of mitigated aging. The Eden Alternative responds to that challenge in a substantial, effective way, and that is why it has grown so much and spread so far. No matter where it is practiced, its work is founded on the ten principles on the facing page.

These ideas are the purest expression of what Eden is. They do not change. The techniques that Eden makes available to those who

Eden Alternative Principles

1. The three plagues of loneliness, helplessness, and boredom account for the bulk of suffering among our elders.
2. An elder-centered community commits to creating a human habitat where life revolves around close and continuing contact with plants, animals, and children. It is these relationships that provide the young and old alike with a pathway to a life worth living.
3. Loving companionship is the antidote to loneliness. Elders deserve easy access to human and animal companionship.
4. An elder-centered community creates opportunity to give as well as to receive care. This is the antidote to helplessness.
5. An elder-centered community imbues daily life with variety and spontaneity by creating an environment in which unexpected and unpredictable interactions and happenings can take place. This is the antidote to boredom.
6. Meaningless activity corrodes the human spirit. The opportunity to do meaningful things is essential to human health.
7. Medical treatment should be the servant of genuine human caring, never its master.
8. An elder-centered community honors its elders by de-emphasizing top-down bureaucratic authority, seeking instead to place the maximum possible decision-making authority in the hands of the elders or in the hands of those closest to them.
9. Creating an elder-centered community is a never-ending process. Human growth must never be separated from human life.
10. Wise leadership is the lifeblood of any struggle against the three plagues. For it, there can be no substitute.

wish to pursue these principles, however, continue to evolve. The methods used by Edenizing organizations today are substantially different from the methods in use in 1996, and what works best in 2006 will, I hope, be substantially different from what is done today. Like them or loathe them, nursing homes will be with us for decades to come. Millions of people will spend, too often against their will, substantial time as nursing home residents. A generation of men and women will devote their careers to trying to improve these homes. The Eden Alternative is the beginning, not the end, of an epic journey. It shows us what is possible and encourages us to continue exploring—to continue asking how we can improve the well-being of our elders and, in doing so, bring a new elderhood into being.

Resistance

The Peril of Great Power

Every person who, on a humid summer night, hears the rumble of distant thunder cannot help but ask, is the storm moving nearer to or farther from me and mine? If the sound recedes, we settle into a peaceful slumber, finding little reason to lie awake worrying about the faraway strangers who live in the storm's path. If the thunder draws near, we cannot sleep. We are up—alert—watching, thinking, planning. The wind rises, rustling the trees in the darkness. If the storm gathers strength, the radio is switched on. We worry and pace, little imagining that miles away others are pulling their covers close, confident that the tempest will pass them by.

The catastrophe of institutionalization seems very far off to most people. It just doesn't seem possible that, someday, it might touch us directly. Although the Eden Alternative offers elders a refuge from loneliness, helplessness, and boredom, we should not let this achievement divert us from searching out deeper, more penetrating insights into the workings of the cult of adulthood. Even a cursory examination of contemporary society will show that the plagues of the nursing home are much more widespread than we might suppose. Loneliness, helplessness, and boredom are seeping into the lives of adults and, even more sadly, those of children. Youth offers no immunity.

We are all in the path of this storm. We should pay close attention to the lives we are making for our elders, for their plight is but a

forewarning of the suffering we are preparing for ourselves—not in some distant future but in the near term. The cult of adulthood is always working its way among us, ceaselessly refining the image of the worthy adult. Each year the standard of expected performance is nudged higher. Each year we grow one year older. A collision is inevitable. Even so, it can be difficult to muster much enthusiasm for the problems of the aged. Our collective denial of aging helps us forget the fact that we must follow in our elders' footsteps. Hundreds of millions of people find comfort in this illusion.

We all want to avoid unpleasant situations and we share a preference for what a philosopher might call the unexamined life. The rhythms of faith, work, and home lull us with their familiarity. Unhappiness, when it comes, is most palatable when it is the consequence of personal troubles—the loss of a job, the collapse of a marriage, a spiritual crisis. Difficulties of this kind are part of every life, and the pain they bring can be tempered by the knowledge that "this too shall pass." Social upheaval, however, is much more disturbing because we fear that it will bring, directly into our lives, hard truths that cannot be denied.

In a youth-obsessed culture, denial and aging are bound tightly to one another. Denial is powerful, but it does have limits. Eventually the gathering storm will touch us directly, endangering our comfortable illusions, upsetting or even destroying our hopes and dreams. Issues of social and economic history, which might ordinarily be left to experts, become matters of grim, personal importance. The status quo, which served us so conveniently and for so long, vanishes. Sources of unease, which were previously nameless and mostly hidden, emerge from the shadows.

Several years before I started work on this book, I was invited to give a series of lectures in Texas. I spoke in Austin and spent a day there teaching people about our Eden Alternative approach to long-term care. I was scheduled to be in San Antonio the next day, so a small group of us piled into an SUV and headed south on I-35. I was tired, and since the vehicle was full, I volunteered to ride in the lug-

gage compartment. I crawled over the back seat and arranged the bags so that I could sleep.

An hour or so into the trip I began, very gradually, to wake from my nap. The setting sun soaked the hill country in a rich red light. I lay still and watched as the land gave way to something else. Mile after mile of "strip"—seemingly endless formations of burger joints, muffler shops, themed restaurants, and clothing outlets—passed before my eyes. Together they formed the monotonous procession that can be seen anywhere and everywhere. Lulled by the hum of the highway, I drifted into a way of seeing without looking, watching without thinking.

I nodded off, and when I woke again the light of day was nearly gone. We were close to San Antonio, and the parade outside the window continued, now illuminated by electric lights. I felt in the grip of some strange, waking trance. Everything I was seeing—the cars, the streets, the streetlights, the shops, the faceless cinder-block walls, the garish flashing signs—was perfectly ordinary. At the same time, I was shaken by the appearance of something entirely new. All of the steel, neon, and concrete had merged into a whole that was far larger and much more menacing than the sum of its parts. Where I had once seen only the hectic jumble of the usual, I now sensed the presence of something powerful and mysterious.

It took me years to understand this vision. I filled volumes of black-and-white speckled composition books with questions, ideas, and possibilities. This work helped me to realize, slowly and fitfully, that I had glimpsed the cult of adulthood—not as it would wish to be seen but as it truly is. Somehow, I had caught unawares the business, the busyness, the blithe disregard for the genius of place and person, and the antlike devotion to DOING-being that characterize the cult of adulthood. In my early descriptions of this vision, I called the thing I had seen "It" because I could think of no other name. With practice, I was able to see "It" in a thousand different places. "It" was in the mind-numbing standardization of the food we eat. "It" was in the sprawling, stereotyped housing tracts that I could see from the air. "It" was in the mass-produced music, entertainment, ideas, and opinions that clogged the radio and television.

"It" can be found wherever the cult of adulthood has crushed the belief that *being* has been, is, and should always be an honored partner of *doing* in the affairs of daily life. "It" is a world in which meaning is too often reduced to numerical terms.

Slowly, I began to appreciate how this insight connected to my work with elders. My peek behind the curtain was a stroke of good fortune because it let me, a vigorous and able-bodied adult, see what elders see. It let me look at adulthood from the outside. The essential truth of any social system is always most evident to those who live on its periphery. I had been living my life deep inside the cult of adulthood and had imagined that the energy and enthusiasm I was pouring into the work of reforming long-term care was a benign form of rebellion against its power. I was wrong.

In fact, my crusade for change did not directly challenge the cult of adulthood. Working to improve the lives of frail elders—fighting for human habitats that might help them thrive and not just survive—is necessary but not sufficient. The roots of declinism remain undisturbed. The suffering that comes with aging springs from the tragic misinterpretation of the role that elderhood should play in a healthy society.

Our longevity is not simply a matter of chronology or even biology; it is, most of all, the product of a collective imagination. The old age that we know, and so often loathe, is the creation of adulthood. Adults have sculpted and shaped each feature with chisel and file. We recoil from the grim visage they have made for us and too often forget that it sprang from the cult of adulthood and its campaign to remake the whole of human experience in its image.

Adulthood (along with its close ally, technology) gains and holds its power over us by promising us the perpetual union of youth with vitality. Such a combination is, of course, impossible, and if it were only a hopeful daydream it would do little harm. But the denial of both aging and the ancient practices of elderhood distorts and degrades human life from the first breath to the last. The cult of adulthood is creating a mighty reservoir of grief and anger.

A betting person would put money on the continued dominance of adulthood. After all, its control of society, government, and culture

has become so complete that it no longer fears to trample traditional boundaries and beliefs. Childhood is increasingly being redirected away from its own pursuits and made into a proving ground for the adults of the future. Elderhood has been marginalized, its rightful place as an epic human achievement minimized or denied outright. Those whose existence defies the slogan of "adulthood forever" are held inside vast adult-run institutions that are dedicated to the isolation and, whenever possible, reformation of its aged inmates. Like any colossus, adulthood would seem to have nothing to fear.

Histories of empires remind us that great concentrations of power frequently sow the seeds of their own destruction. Day by day, the social conditions needed for the reemergence of elderhood as a potent sociocultural force are developing. The unprecedented global age boom has already started supplying the numbers. We can already feel the influence of a remarkable generation of senescents. These men and women are better educated, more affluent, healthier, and more socially engaged than any group of older people the world has ever seen. More than any generation in history, they have demonstrated an eagerness to challenge and even overturn long-established beliefs. There is little to suggest that the role of the quiet, uncomplaining grandparent will appeal to them. What they are missing—what we are all missing—is the vision of an elderhood with its own claim to greatness. Given the immutable fact of aging (yours and mine included), a new appreciation of longevity seems very likely to emerge. When it does, it will lead millions to question, challenge, and, finally, overthrow the doctrine of youth's perfection.

The Liberation of the Elders

Liberation is a distinctly human ambition. Animals instinctively struggle to free themselves *from* cold, hunger, confinement, and pain. None, as far as we know, can yearn for the freedom *to* become something other than what they are. Accordingly, liberation cannot be limited to the struggle for freedom *from* what is wrong, immoral, or evil. Such victories are valuable, but they represent the beginning of a struggle, not its end. Alone, they will never bring the fullness of

human freedom into being. The logic of liberation demands that we go beyond the struggle to be free *from* injustice. Those who strive for liberation must shoulder the even more difficult work of gaining the freedom *to* become all that we are capable of being.

Early advocates for the aged understandably concentrated their efforts on eradicating the mistreatment of the old. They were among the first to speak openly against the ageism and overt bigotry practiced toward the aged. Their fight to improve the standing of the older adult in an often hostile, youth-oriented society has been carried bravely forward for decades and has succeeded in important ways. The much broader effort to liberate elders and elderhood, however, has yet to be truly begun. Such a crusade is necessary not because it can right wrongs that are visited on older people (although it can) but because it is the essential precondition for a new culture committed to a better quality of life *for people of all ages*.

Elderhood first took root in human society as one component of a vital intergenerational exchange that joined children, adults, and elders in a healthy web of interdependence. It flourished because it contributed importantly to the well-being of people of all ages. Today, we speak mostly of the assistance that the young provide to the old and pay little heed to what people of all ages receive from the old. This is a tragic oversight because it is the experience of life in a complex, interdependent, multigenerational society that, more than anything else, teaches us *how to be human*. Still, there are those who will see little correlation between the liberation of elderhood and a general improvement in the well-being of all. They should not be so quick to reject such a link. In nineteenth-century America it gradually became clear that the institution of slavery was damaging the fabric of society—that the wrongs inflicted on one group actually harmed all.

The drive to abolish slavery in antebellum America succeeded in large part because the effort was not limited to simply tempering injustice. It was relatively easy to argue that those held in involuntary servitude had a right to be *free from* brutality, forced labor, and inhumane living conditions. The truly radical idea was that these same people should also be *free to* live their lives as full citizens of the

American nation. The abolitionist movement transformed a plea for justice into a cry for liberation that convulsed the American nation. When Lincoln declared, "A house divided against itself cannot stand," he named the danger that slavery posed for the nation as a whole. Lincoln knew well that the question of slavery, the conflict over slavery, and the injustices of slavery were harmful to *all* people, free and slave, from North and South.

This century will be defined by our struggle over questions related to aging and longevity. History will judge us by how well or how poorly we advance the liberation of elders and elderhood. Those who have devoted their lives to the abatement of the worst elements of ageism, those who have struggled to secure basic human rights for the oldest and frailest of the old, have long felt themselves to be laboring in some distant and little-regarded vineyard. In fact, they are the vanguard of a looming worldwide cultural upheaval. The liberation of elders and elderhood is not an aging issue. It is not a generational issue. It is not about government programs or public policy. It is not about aching knees, weakening eyes, or even the wrinkles that line our faces. It is a world-changing struggle that can remake the experience of life from cradle to grave. It is our last, best hope for saving our world from the all-conquering power of adults.

In the twentieth century, capitalism was pitted against communism in a struggle that consumed the sweat and blood of three generations. Citizens of communist nations who set themselves against the will of their totalitarian governments contributed importantly to the communist system's collapse. Their resistance began, indeed could only begin, by nurturing dissent as far from Moscow as possible. Party leaders, secure in their Kremlin offices, had no reason to question the regime's actions. (The powerful have little appetite for dissent.) Instead, anti-communist ideology took shape within the very Siberian concentration camps that Stalin had created to uproot and destroy those who opposed the Party.

Those who would oppose the cult of adulthood cannot afford to ignore this history. Because they live every moment of their lives in its thrall, adults are unlikely by themselves to reverse the dangerous enlargement of contemporary adulthood. Our society needs to see,

be inspired by, and learn from the weakest, frailest, most forgetful of us all. Elders are the true dissidents of our time. Their existence offers proof that adulthood does not last forever. Their lives speak to the possibility of life beyond adulthood even when their voices have fallen silent. Millions are being held, like Soviet-era political prisoners, at the farthest remove from power, unseen but not forgotten.

The liberation of elders and elderhood will be launched by an alliance of adults who are awakened to the perils created by an out-of-control adulthood, and elders who are living examples of what elderhood can be. Adult biases make it easy to overlook the potential influence of people living with memory loss, urinary incontinence, paralysis, and multiple chronic illnesses. Then again, revolutions are known to germinate in unexpected places among unlikely people.

The Allies

The oldest of the old cannot overthrow the cult of adulthood by themselves. In fact, they represent the polar opposite of the conventional image of the revolutionary. To say the least, the very old lack the swaggering panache of the insurgent. However, power has never been the currency most appropriate to elderhood. Elders' influence has always been distinct from the direct, mandatory DOING-being power of the adult. They rely, instead, on the subtle, indirect influence of BEING-doing. For those living in a manic world that is drunk on doing—even as it thirsts for meaning—the influence of elderhood can be especially appealing. It entices us with the very virtues and gifts we need most. The discovery of longevity is the greatest of all human achievements; it made us and it made our world. We now await the rediscovery of longevity, the reinvention of elderhood. The emergence of a distinctive twenty-first-century elderhood is crucial to the future of our society, our environment, and the well-being of people of all ages. Old age exists not as a threat but as a promise, ready, as it has always been, to lead us toward a richer, more rewarding way of living in this world.

Because it seems absurd that elders could inspire an overthrow of the cult of adulthood, those who choose to give the idea a second

thought usually urge me to turn my attention to the young old instead. Senescents would seem to have all the time, money, and energy that activists require. They have set aside the compulsions of "have to do" in order to embrace the universe of "want to do." And they are joined by millions among us who are already making important contributions to the well-being of people of all ages.

Senescents are the kings and queens of volunteerism, and no community would ever want to be without them, but they are not ideal candidates for leading the struggle against the cult of adulthood. They are aware, they are energized, they are engaged, and they are, in so many ways, still adults—and that is the problem.

In a youth-worshiping society, senescents live perilously close to the precipice of obsolescence. While they are no longer enchanted by doing, having, and getting, they are fearful of losing their status as adults. The strength of this fear is often lost on advocates for social change who are eager to capture and make use of senescents' retained ability to "do." It is true that senescents find value in the shift from "have to do" to "want to do." The young old voluntarily build houses, deliver meals, and organize voter registration drives. Hidden in the can-do ideology of the older volunteer, however, is a much less useful dynamic.

These contributions of time and energy are often used to furnish proof of the senescent's continued success in living and working as an adult. The tip-off here is that the work has its reference point in the past, in the flower of youth. This emphasis is crystallized in the word "still." The volunteer is still active, still contributing, still a valuable member of the community of adults, still faithful to doing, getting, and having. We are so accustomed to this orientation that we rarely notice its influence over us.

This is a very different thing from the person who volunteers in the community in order to prepare for the future, for the ultimate attainment of elderhood. Until we have a social consciousness that values elderhood, the most energetic senescents will remain collaborators of adults and adulthood.

So what are we to do? If the old old are not meant to confront these injustices alone, and the young old are mostly still in the grip

of adulthood, how then is the struggle against the cult of adulthood to be sustained?

Our elders will need allies, and these allies will have to come from within adult society. Most adults have no reason to care about elders and the indignities visited on the aged. They ignore elders in an ongoing effort to deny the truth of their own aging. Sometimes, adults with older relatives become enraged when someone they love is exiled from adult society and made to live in the old-age archipelago. These family members can become fierce critics of the nursing home industry. Far fewer, however, are those adults who can peer unblinkingly into the lives of the oldest and frailest among us and see, in magnified form, the growing injustices they are experiencing in their own lives.

These adults understand that the inclination of the nursing home to value the safety of residents over their human rights is but an echo of a public policy that too often allows security concerns to trump the Bill of Rights. They wonder at the growing power of corporations and the tendency to equate consumerism with citizenship. The nursing home is, after all, the bizarre ultimate end point of the consumer lifestyle. The corporations that run nursing homes have the most detailed databases on their "customers" of any companies in the world. The management knows what the residents eat, when they sleep, even when they move their bowels. They are paid to assume total control over the most private and intimate needs of all. The numbing sameness of the food we eat, the opinions we hear, and the buildings we live and work in has already reached its conclusion in the old-age archipelago. Inside the walls of the institution, the only choices are those approved by the professional staff. So it is that ninety-year-old Korean women are served mashed potatoes and gravy for dinner, just like everyone else. The medicalization of late life that debases our longevity by translating advanced old age into a litany of defects, injuries, and illnesses has a parallel in the rising number of children who are being treated for disorders that were not long ago unknown to parents, children, or teachers. The malaise of the institution is gradually becoming our malaise.

People often say to me, "Hey, Dr. Thomas, you'd better get this all fixed before I get old." I laugh and tell them that I will do my best.

People like to imagine that such problems all lie in the future and, if they are lucky, might be sorted out before they enter their own old age. What they do not realize is that the fault lies not in our aging but in the denial of aging. The damage that the cult of adulthood is doing to us all is simply magnified among our elders. The destruction of elderhood creates a danger that people of all ages must share.

Still, the elders have allies. There is a small but growing number of adults who share a progressive orientation toward the true nature of our longevity. They see meaning and worth in aging. They dream of a better way to be with and provide for the most frail among us, but they are also increasingly aware of the defects that mark a society without elders. Fortunately, their influence is larger than their numbers. Many of these men and women have been actively challenging declinism in their work; others are making the brave decision to set their own adulthood aside so that they may move, deliberately, into elderhood. Some have met with startling success. All have stories to tell. They are the true allies of elders and elderhood.

The progressive movement may be small and scattered, but it can take pride in being the vanguard of a long, worldwide struggle to liberate elders and elderhood. Far more than most adults, the people who share the movement's values understand and are willing to confront the damage being done by the doctrine of youth's perfection. Already coalescing into ad hoc groups and factions, the movement is capable of speaking with extraordinary unity about the importance of freeing elders from injustice. As might be expected, there is much less agreement on how the struggle should be conducted.

For me, membership in the resistance against the cult of adulthood has been maddeningly fulfilling, thrilling, and frustrating—and infuriatingly worthwhile. The resistance is and must remain a passionately uncoordinated and lovingly quarrelsome affair. This work matters greatly, for it is within the struggle to free our elders that we will learn how to free ourselves from the grip of the cult of adulthood.

Pr

World Making

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A few years back, I saw the conflict between adult and elder ideas of place play out in classic tragic fashion. I live in a rural area and one of my neighbors was an elder who had lived in her house for more than eighty years. She had moved there with her family in 1918, when she was just four years old. She never married and by the late 1990s was the sole surviving member of her family. An adult neighbor became concerned about her and began trying to convince her to move to the city, about twenty miles away. The elder said no. The friend persisted. Finally, fate intervened. The elder woman burned her leg on a gas heater. A trip to the emergency room led to a hospital admission.

Well-meaning adults in the hospital saw an old woman who was clearly in need of services. She was transferred against her will from the hospital to a nursing home. A week later, the elder was told that her beloved dog (who had been entrusted to the neighbor) had "died." The woman never went home again. When we visited her, we found not the feisty survivor who had thrived in the country without electricity or indoor plumbing, but a shell-shocked facility resident. Removing the woman from her place may have extended the life of her body, but it destroyed her spirit. She had been torn up by and from her roots.

The gift of place is the gift of meaning. Human beings possess a remarkable ability to unite meaning with the material world. This is how a person, place, or thing becomes sacred. Is a Bible, a Torah, or a Koran made of paper, ink, and glue? Yes. Is it much more than paper, ink, and glue? Yes, again. Holy books are different from telephone books because the former are enriched with meaning while the latter have none.

For the elder, a loss of place carries with it a potentially lethal loss of meaning. Taking meaning away from a person or place is a form of profanity. Pornography is profane because it shears the people it depicts of their essential humanity and displays them as objects. Certain words are profane when they are used without reference to or in defiance of their sacred meaning. When elders leave their own place and enter into a long-term care facility, they are exposed to a ravaging placelessness. Completely without malice, these facilities

profane the people who live inside them. Like
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over ritual, and value information more
care facilities are workplaces, and the live
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A Total Institution

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The prison system, state psychiatric hospitals, and concentration camps are clearly part of this world. The long-term care system of nursing homes and assisted living facilities, sad to say, fits the mold as well. While the intention of these organizations is clearly different from that of penitentiaries, they share a common, rigid division of people into the guardians and the guarded, the therapists and the sick, the staff and the residents.

Incremental change has done much to improve long-term care in America in the past, but it has its own limits—and we have reached them at last. While I am grateful for the improvements that have made life better for millions of nursing home residents (and have done my best to contribute to those improvements), I know in my heart that the old-age archipelago must go. I am, in this matter, an abolitionist.

The Shiny Roof Tile

Our society faces a challenge that is both noble and dangerous: we must confront the power of adulthood and restore a healthier, more balanced understanding of the human life cycle. The first step in this confrontation will lead us to create a safe place for a new elderhood—a sanctuary that is outside of, distinct from, and independent of the old-age archipelago. There are those who would put off this task until after America's sixteen thousand nursing homes have themselves been reformed. This temptation springs from the illusion that we can "fix" long-term care. A Japanese folktale makes clear the enormous difference between change and transcendence:

A sage took a young man as his student. The youth was careful and diligent, and he studied the master's every word. Strange as it may this disappointed the teacher and so he resolved to teach the true nature of wisdom.

found a broken roof tile lying on the he sought his student. When roof tile with a fold ge and he

The sage responded, "I am polishing this roof tile and I am going to keep right on polishing it until it becomes a jewel."

"But master, it doesn't matter how long you polish that tile, it will never become a jewel."

"So true," the sage responded. "It is also true that you will never find the wisdom you seek as long as you insist on changing only what you know. True wisdom comes only to those willing to change what they are."

The liberation of elders and elderhood goes far beyond the "fixing" of long-term care. It will be a decades-long struggle, but it is already under way. In order for it to succeed, it must be nurtured in a safe place, far from the centers of adult power. Elderhood needs a sanctuary. In the past, it could have been said that the family home formed just such a shelter. Most elders throughout human history have lived out the last decades of life within the embrace of an extended family. Changes in society have placed that option out of reach for the majority of older people living in industrialized nations. They make it perfectly clear to anyone who will listen that off from this traditional refuge, older people are easily snared el (and utterly false) distinction between dependence and nt, most of all, is to remain in their own homes. In ssible, they devote themselves to maintaining il in this struggle and lose their grip on he netherworld of dependency. pecifically and energetically refutes going, gone." We, as yet, have ursuit of the most positive ces require close coop- hatically resists the ust have a sanc- d can grow use

that a valued and valuable elderhood truly exists before we voluntarily surrender our adulthood. As a society, we, perhaps more than any people who have ever lived, need elders. We need a renewed elderhood that can help older adults become the elders they were meant to be. We need a place where we can learn how best to make this happen. Like the student in the story, we must learn the difference between improvement and transformation. I believe that the foundation for this worldwide transcendent effort can be built on the elemental concepts of warm, smart, and green.

Elderhood's Sanctuary

Living Together Intentionally

Everywhere I go I meet people who are imagining a new kind of old age for themselves. Whether it is on a dirt road in rural Alberta or in a cab in Manhattan, the sequence unfolds again and again. Once my companions learn what I do for a living and my passion for a new longevity, they are eager to share their plans. "You see," they say, "my friends and I, we're not ever going to any nursing home. No, you see, what we are going to do is go in together on a house and we are all going to live together. We are all going to take care of each other." There is a good chance that you have heard someone describe this vision; perhaps it is your dream as well.

There is even a novel that takes this kind of intentional community as its theme. *Where River Turns to Sky,* by Gregg Kleiner, tells the story of octogenarian George Caster. When George's best friend dies lonely and alone at the Silver Gardens Nursing Home, George pledges to help other residents escape that fate. He buys a big old house, paints it fire-engine red, and "liberates" a small group of residents. Together they make a home. One of the characters describes life in the house: "It's a big change here from living in the Gardens. Sometimes I forget how big. In my head too, things are different. Some of the fog has cleared up, the loose wires seem a little tighter. Time's passed. Time. Faster here than in the Gardens. Lots faster. Probably because there is always something going on."

Whatever happens to them, these characters know that they have chosen their own destiny; they live their own lives.

Making the dream come true—that is the thing. More and more of us live alone, without close family members living nearby. The need and the desire to come together with others who are approaching elderhood is growing. The reality is, of course, more complicated than the dream. Kleiner's novel is worth reading for any number of reasons but especially for his honest appreciation of how hard it is for people to live with one another (the only thing harder is being left alone).

We are only beginning to understand how to create and maintain the sanctuaries that elderhood needs if it is ever to develop properly. Those of us who have been working with elders, organizations, staffs, and families to make human habitats bloom in the most unlikely places have learned some things that all those who seek a sanctuary for elderhood are likely to find useful. Living together intentionally requires us to understand the sources and power of human warmth, how it is created, and how it can be destroyed. We must be willing and able to search out the tools and technologies that are best suited to the task of making such sanctuaries healthy and safe. Finally, we must remember that well-being depends importantly on our relationship with the living world that, in the end, sustains us all.

Warm

Human warmth is a peculiar thing that can be felt much more easily than it can be known. Some organizations, like some people, radiate warmth. They are rich in optimism and trust, and they exude the spirit of generosity. Cold organizations, in contrast, demonstrate a distressingly familiar pattern of pessimism, cynicism, and stinginess. The ability to create and maintain human warmth is an essential attribute for any organization that aspires to create a sanctuary for elderhood. Warm organizations are adept at fostering well-being; cold organizations are not. Just as importantly, warm organizations are flexible and adapt readily to new and changing circumstances. Most of us can report bitter personal experiences with the rigid inflexibility that defines cold organizations.

Our efforts to reform long-term care organizations using the Eden Alternative have led us to embrace the practice of "doing good deeds without the expectation of return" as the most effective approach to warming people and organizations. Genuine altruism practiced as an everyday habit rarely fails to touch the human heart. Some organizations, though, have shown themselves to be much better at this than others. Careful review of our experience in this area has shown three attributes that seem to have the greatest influence over the ability of an organization to create and maintain warmth.

Small

Early twenty-first-century nursing homes are the product of a single-minded focus on economies of scale. They collect expertise, labor, equipment, and residents according to the same logic that led Andrew Carnegie to build mammoth soot-belching steel mills. A determined effort to reduce costs and standardize operations has encouraged large size in long-term care facilities. While the financial argument in favor of gigantism is well established, the balance sheet fails to record the human cost of largeness. Being "cared for" along with one hundred, two hundred, or even three hundred other similarly situated people carries a non-economic price that is substantial.

Intentional communities have long recognized the perils of great size. The leaders of fraternities, sororities, churches, synagogues, and monasteries know that the bigger their communities become, the harder it is to maintain the human warmth that grows from knowing and caring about the people around us. Human beings evolved within small social groups and are attuned to their nuances. We have (on the species level) little experience with large, anonymous collections of others. This is not to suggest that small is always warm or even that small is always better than large. Plenty of small towns, small companies, and even small families make life miserable for the people trapped within them. E. F. Schumacher recognized this and described this tension in his book *Small Is Beautiful:*

> What I wish to emphasize is the *duality* of the human requirement when it comes to the question of size: there is no *single* answer. For

> his different purposes man needs many different structures, both small ones and large ones, some exclusive and some comprehensive . . . For constructive work, the principal task is always the restoration of some kind of balance. Today, we suffer from an almost universal idolatry of giantism. It is therefore necessary to insist on the virtues of smallness—where this applies.

A sanctuary for elderhood should be built on a human scale, one that answers to the purposes of community rather than the economics of an industrial enterprise. Experts in the field rarely dispute the desirability of small size. They do object that it is not economically feasible. The habit of forecasting financial calamity based on projecting the performance of a typical (large) nursing home artificially shrunken to a more human scale tells us much more about the accountant's unquestioned assumptions than about the potential viability of a small, warm sanctuary for elderhood.

Critics of smallness often overlook the many ways that large size creates diseconomies of scale. Caring for others is an art and, as such, cannot easily be reduced to a repetitive sequence of tasks and procedures. Food, energy, and time are all wasted in a never-ending quest for economy. Industrial long-term care's habit of idolizing machine-like efficiency actually wastes more money than it saves. A visit to the Dumpsters parked beside the loading dock of your local nursing home will give you a good look at the stinking remains of tons of spoiled food. Ordered by the tractor-trailer load; prepared in vast, highly mechanized kitchens; and served according to an institution-defined menu and schedule, as much as 40 percent of the purchased food is thrown away every day. Ever eager to cut its food budget, the old-age archipelago remains stubbornly unaware of its wasteful confusion of the human and the mechanical.

All other things being equal, and with the full understanding that small size does not guarantee warmth, we can say that when it comes to creating a sanctuary in which elders and elderhood can develop, small is better.

Flat

The impulse toward hierarchy and bureaucratic authority grows stronger as human organizations grow larger. In nursing homes, hierarchy exchanges genuine human caring for established-policies-guiding-an-assembled-staff-in-the-efficient-execution-of-tasks-and-procedures-delineated-by-an-interdisciplinary-care-plan-document. Few people work in organizations that are as rigidly compartmentalized and uniformly hierarchical as prisons and long-term care facilities. Even so, millions of elders have learned through firsthand experience that the multiple layers of a bureaucracy can puree care and feed it out with a spoon.

Tragically, long-term care institutions are much more hierarchical than other organizations of comparable size. Although they are often part of multifacility chains, each building usually employs only one hundred to two hundred people. This makes them small businesses by most definitions. Few companies of this size, however, would tolerate, or be willing to pay for, that highly departmentalized and rigidly hierarchical company structure used by nursing homes. Nursing home administrators' intense devotion to the chain of command is usually ascribed to the fact that errors made in long-term care facilities can and do lead to physical pain, emotional suffering, and even death. We expect that organizations dealing with stakes this high will place a heavy emphasis on the internal processes and procedures that can control risk. Society routinely bolsters this behavior with a rigorous pattern of external regulation. Flatness (having a less complex hierarchical organizational structure) will always come more easily to a … person advertising firm (little risk) than to a hun… …ower plant staff (huge risk).

… safety, predictability, and accountability— …ice. People who choose to work for …l Motors, General Foods, etc.) …le of loyalty. This knowl- …y the corporation. …ironments, in …ggle to …ir

personal sense of calling (which is often profound), and the brutal logic of institutional decision making.

Rigid hierarchy and a near-religious faith in bureaucratic authority may suit an army or a global corporation, but they are incompatible with the tender art of giving and receiving genuine human care. Old age initially developed within the context of family, tribe, and clan, and the organic hierarchy found within these entities has nurtured its development for thousands of years. The formal hierarchy of the corporation is to the nature of elderhood as oil is to water.

Careful observers have noted the vigor with which long-term care institutions enforce systems of control for both staff and residents. People who work in low-status positions nearly always stay at that level. The residents are confined to the role of institutional inmate, and despite the benevolence that inspires resident empowerment programs, they will remain, always, in the inmate role. The slope of the skilled nursing facility's organizational pyramid is steep, and its sides are as slick as ice.

All human organizations have, and need to have, hierarchy. Perfect flatness would create a dangerous anarchy. The struggle in this case is not to eliminate hierarchy but to create an organization in which it is far less steep and far less slippery. Flat human organizations are also notable for their economical use of roles. The family, for example, has survived and thrived while carrying out complex social and economic functions even though it contains only a handful of roles (mother, father, son, daughter, brother, sister, etc.). The hierarchy-making impulse is strong in contemporary society, and flatness, once achieved, will always be a delicate but valuable creation.

Institutions thrive on hierarchy because it simplifies the work of managing highly complex tasks. Unfortunately, it also obstructs the giving and receiving of care. Because bureaucracies confine people to established roles, the knowing, empathic, resourceful relationship that is the hallmark of caring is often placed out of reach. Assigned roles make it easier to delegate tasks and monitor their completion, but they also cloak the people who inhabit those roles. Juanita Jones becomes a housekeeper. Clara Wilson becomes a resident. Within a hierarchical bureaucracy, it is very difficult for Juanita and Clara to

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exposed the frightening degree to which authority had replaced morality in the conduct of their lives.

Codifying and enforcing rules of conduct that protect the weak, the infirm, and the frail is a cardinal virtue of a just society. In the world of long-term care, government officials and advocates have long shared the sense that these written protections need strengthening. After all, these rules and their enforcement have protected millions of people against abuse and neglect. But that is not all they do. They also uphold the law of unintended consequences. The regulation of the speech and behavior of those who work in the long-term care industry has fostered the mistaken notion that compliance with regulations is equivalent to achieving quality and justice. Regulations are designed to be minimum standards, but official approval is offered in equal measure to those who merely comply with published standards and to those who soar above them. The enforcers equate what is permitted with what is right and what is forbidden with what is wrong. Like a silent and invasive carcinoma, written rules slowly and silently replace unspoken, deeply personal commitments to elders and to the work of meeting their needs.

The regulation of long-term care has improved quality and made life better for millions of nursing home residents. Governments will always have a duty to watch out for people who are being cared for by others. Nursing homes present an especially challenging case in this regard because these large, highly specialized organizations are devilishly difficult to manage. We need to remember that the patterns of regulation that exist today were established in response to an enormous, powerful industry that consisted almost entirely of large, highly bureaucratic institutions. The guardian has been shaped by the threat against which it guards.

For many who work in the industry, officially sanctioned codes of behavior, while onerous at times, can also be said to offer a refuge from the ambiguity that accompanies questions of morality. Legal formality can be attractive, efficient, and objective. Over time, even the most spiritually centered organizations move gradually toward formalized policies and procedures. The road to formalism is well worn. Much less familiar is the path that balances a rooted commit-

ment to elders and the potential of a positive elderhood with the might and desirability of written rules. This is not an either-or proposition. The pendulum has swung too far toward an unthinking compliance with arbitrary rules. We must start it back toward the center before we forget that such a change is both possible and desirable.

When it comes to sustaining human warmth, there is no substitute for having deeply rooted beliefs.

Smart

The technology revolution that is remaking life, work, and leisure in the twenty-first century has done much for people of all ages. The aged, in particular, have benefited from rapid advances in medical technologies that mitigate age-related changes. New drugs, devices, and surgical procedures have done so much to improve quality of life in old age that only a fool would want to grow old without them. Much less obvious are the many ways in which our culture's use and misuse of tools have degraded the meaning and experiences that are unique to elderhood. Our information age continues to promise—and deliver—greater speed, greater bandwidth, and ever-easier access to anything that can be sent over a wire, but it is much less forthcoming with nondigital virtues. To love and be loved, to cherish and to hurt and then be healed—none of these gifts will be sent via e-mail. Technology is, and will remain, the is largely responsible for sustaining the world-not been an ally of elderhood. We deserve, letely, the unique new tools we will ders and elderhood. ling the confusion between echnology flourishes in oratories. It is tend- d its workings mystery. the

the Paleolithic era to the sophisticated bows and arrows of the indigenous Americans, making clever use of available materials is an elegant human art. While I am familiar with advanced medical technologies and deploy many of them in my work as a physician, I also work with the draft horses we keep on our farm. Over the years I have come to appreciate the genius of the harnesses, lines, and hitches. Every strap, buckle, and ring has a purpose, and taken together they are as refined as any airplane wing—and just as useful.

Even more to the point, all of the harnesses being used today are the product of centuries of refinement by skilled harness makers working with simple tools in small shops. I doubt any school of engineering could improve on the convenience, safety, and utility of such a harness no matter how many minds and dollars were set to the task. Smart technology looks and feels comfortable and human. Those who would make a sanctuary for elders and elderhood will need to develop their own tools and techniques for creating and then sustaining the most positive elderhood possible.

Human communities produce tools and are then, to a surprising extent, shaped by their own implements. Technology molds culture, which then influences technology. Our tools and the choices we make about their use have a moral dimension that we ignore at our peril. The smart use of technology demands that we be conscious of the relationship between our tools and our actions, our actions and our most cherished beliefs.

I live with my family on a 250-acre farm and have chosen a path that is distinct from that of most other farmers in our area. Alternative and renewable sources of energy supply the power we need to run the house and farm. We are "off the grid," relying instead on the sun and the wind to generate electricity. In the fields and forest we use draft horsepower to get work done. Instead of specializing in one product as most large farms do, we pursue a version of diversified, low-input, sustainable agriculture. Our philosophy helps us select the tools that are best for our chosen work. We happily employ many different forms of technology, low and high, but we insist that our tools strengthen rather than weaken our commitment to one another.

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Green

A great deal of proof exists that it is better to live in a garden than a machine. Human beings need close and continuing contact with the living world, and it is wrong to deny it to them. In our work with the Eden Alternative, we have had to master the art of bringing the living world into the lives of elders being held within large, inflexible, and sterile institutions. This is difficult work, and success can never be guaranteed. The good news is that years of working to change an intransigent system have strengthened our resolve and sharpened our skills.

Our direct experience with the Eden Alternative is bolstered by research that supports the value of connecting human beings to the living world. The great Roman poet Virgil explored this idea in "The Bucolics," his paean to rural life. Modern thinkers take a somewhat more technical approach, and some of the major themes of their literature are being developed under the headings of "Eco-psychology," the "Biophilia Hypothesis," and "Deep Ecology." Those in pursuit of a new kind of longevity should make use of the insights developed by these investigators. Their work will serve us well when it is joined with the practical aspects of integrating the living world into our lives.

Any sanctuary for elderhood must recognize, from the start, that the need for a connection with the living world increases in the last decades of life. Looking back just a few generations, it is hard to find any example—in any culture—in which older people were not encouraged to partake of the comforts provided by close and continuing contact with plants, animals, and children. Indeed, these are connections that most adults manage without difficulty. Families the world over successfully keep pets, care for children, and tend gardens. Somehow, they do it all without policy committees, executive approvals, and regulatory waivers. Any sanctuary for elderhood must become. It will be aided in this work by its small size, commitment to creating the most life, laughter, and compan- sanctuary.

It is necessary that a green environment facilitate contact with nature, but that is not all. Although we seem to forget this at times, human beings are part of nature, too. Being green demands a holistic perspective that includes distinctively human virtues. In his study of healing places, ancient and modern, Wilbert Gesler argues that when we think of illness, wellness, and healing we must expand our perspective so that it includes the role played by the symbolic and social environments that surround us. In order to be well, people need to have access to more than the wind, the moon, and the sun. People need to feel safe—to understand their place in the world and be able to participate with others in meaningful rituals. A truly green sanctuary for elderhood must participate in the realm of myth and spirit. It must be part of a new story we can tell ourselves about our longevity and those who live and work with elders.

There is one other meaning of the word *green* that must be considered. Elders have long served as stewards of their community's natural resources. It is in this capacity that they have long spoken for the seventh generation—the people who will not be born until long after the adults of the day are gone. There is a great need for this practice to be renewed in our materialist, use-and-throw-away society. Any sanctuary for elderhood should embody a concern for safe, sustainable use of natural resources. Doing so will strengthen the capacity of the elders to once again speak with authority in their efforts to ensure that the seventh generation will have what it needs to live in safety and security on this planet.

Every sanctuary for elderhood should be a healing environment that makes it easy for elders to partake of the gifts that regular meaningful contact with the living world has to offer. Sanctuaries should be designed and constructed so that they "rest lightly upon the earth" and honor elderhood's ancient commitment to stewardship.

Principles for Elderhood's Sanctuary

Warm: The ability to create and maintain human warmth is an essential attribute of any group that aspires to create a sanctuary for elderhood.

Small: All other things being equal, and with the full understanding that small size does not guarantee warmth, we can say that when it comes to creating a sanctuary in which elders and elderhood can develop, small is better.

Flat: Bureaucratic hierarchy obstructs the work of caring, as it is rightly understood. Human caring is founded on a knowing, empathic, resourceful response to the needs of another. For those seeking to sustain human warmth, a flat organization is better.

Rooted: When it comes to sustaining human warmth, there is no substitute for having deeply rooted beliefs.

Smart: Smart technology may be high or low, but it must always serve to foster the well-being of elders and those who live and work with elders. Technology (high or low) that restricts, confines, or diminishes elders for the convenience of others or damages their well-being must be abandoned.

Green: Every sanctuary for elderhood should be a healing environment that makes it easy for elders to partake of the gifts that regular meaningful contact with the living world has to offer. Sanctuaries should be designed and constructed so that they "rest lightly upon the earth" and honor elderhood's ancient commitment to stewardship.

The Green House

What If?

There are two great injustices that must be dismantled if a new longevity is ever to take root in our society. First, we must overcome outmoded and dysfunctional ideas about independence and the hallowed role of the private home, which, no matter how lonely, isolating, and boring, is deemed to be the *only* acceptable place to live. Second, we must abolish the old-age archipelago and replace it with something very different. Witness the millions of senescents who are seeing ever more clearly that society has not prepared an attractive way of living into old age. Witness, too, the millions of elders who are trapped in suffocating, tightly managed total institutions. We cannot be free until they are free.

The opportunity here is to transform the *dream* of a warm, loving, nurturing sanctuary into a specific *innovation* that can change how we age. For centuries small groups of people have chosen to live cooperatively in communities of their own making. (Monasteries and convents of all kinds grew from this impulse.) These intentional communities did not rely on blood relations to hold them together. Instead, they depended quite successfully on a shared commitment to specific values and goals. Using this model as a guide, we can exchange the old-age archipelago for a society-wide sanctuary for elders and elderhood. Senescents, in particular, need to learn how to prepare a sanctuary for themselves, their friends, and the

people they love. The elderhood that can take root in such places will do more than anything else to heal the wounds that afflict our society.

It is easy for experts in the field of aging to laugh at such assertions. They fully expect the current system, with appropriate modifications and improvements, to endure ad infinitum. I do not. There is a growing awareness that the buildings that make up the nursing home archipelago are themselves growing old. In fact, the buildings are aging much faster than the people who live within their walls. Most were hastily constructed; many were poorly designed. Now roofs are sagging, pipes are clogging, and maintenance expenses are rising. More and more nursing home operators are talking about gaining approval to build replacement facilities. I say no.

There is virtually no chance that the buildings in use today can survive to house the frail elders of the next two decades. Something will have to be done. We could, of course, rebuild them and then be made to suffer another four decades in the cruel embrace of the institution. More hopefully, we could use this moment to launch a revolution. This is our opportunity to put an end to the old-age archipelago. We can use the ideals of elderhood, rightly understood, and the principles of warmth, smartness, and greenness to create a successor to the long-term care system we have known in the past. We can leave Goffman's *Asylums* behind and embrace instead the millennia-old ideals of intentional community. We can take what we have learned from our experience with the institutionalization of our elders and use those insights to transcend that history. We can ask and then answer the question, what comes next?

What comes next must represent a clear break with the past. A massive shift toward the deinstitutionalization of older people is called for, and the foundation for such a shift is being laid right now. A Green House is a sanctuary for a new kind of elderhood; it is an intentional community for people seeking the worth and meaning in late life. Whether they are fit or frail, "sharp as a tack" or living with dementia, the Green House has a place for elders. It generates human

warmth through its commitment to small size, the de-emphasis of hierarchy, and the power of its belief in the genius of human longevity. The building and the people who share its spaces are dedicated to fostering a new elderhood.

The culture of the Green House is founded on distinct beliefs about aging and about the people who choose to work with elders. It employs an idiosyncratic vocabulary and cultivates patterns of behavior that reinforce its goals and ideals. Some Green Houses will be home to small groups of friends—people who see a benefit in joining together as they approach elderhood. Those Green Houses will be created by people who are searching, as humans always have, for a better way to live. Other Green Houses will offer themselves as a sustainable alternative to the institutionalization of the aged. Those Green Houses will face the challenge of serving, simultaneously, two conflicting goals. They will need to operate successfully within the regulatory and reimbursement schemes that perpetuate the old-age archipelago at the same time as they are expanding their ability to serve as a sanctuary for elderhood. This conflict will endure for the foreseeable future, and efforts to resolve it will play a vital role in the development of the Green House innovation itself.

Not surprisingly, the physical dimensions of a Green House resemble the typical home far more than any institution. Before the first-ever Green Houses were built in Tupelo, Mississippi, we asked Emi Kiyota to bring her expertise in aging-related architecture and design to bear on a single question: How do the elders of Tupelo make their own homes? Emi visited dozens of homes and took more than twelve hundred photographs. These images helped us think about what a Green House that served the people of Tupelo ought to look like. (The Tupelo story is told in an appendix in this book.) You can be sure that, rich or poor, none of these elders' homes in any way resembled either the stiff, pseudomedical aspirations of the conventional nursing home or the faux nostalgia that poses, at least for visitors, as a facsimile of home in facilities that house the aged. Because a Green House must be fitted to a particular time and place, its specific dimensions and layouts can only be derived from the way elders live in a particular locale.

Green Houses will foster a new longevity. Elders who would otherwise be placed in an institution can make a home there. Senescents can choose to enter its intentional community and, once there, seek the meaning, beauty, and worth that are the proper gifts of old age.

Culture

One of the most insidious aspects of the old-age archipelago revolves around the ways in which residents are expected to surrender autonomy and personal dignity as payment for their reliance on the staff. Nursing home residents are removed from the sustaining power of human community and, as inmates of an institution, are made to suffer losses in privacy, freedom, and choice. Feelings of depression, isolation, and worthlessness are pervasive and well documented. The usual response to such an assault on one's personhood is to retreat into learned helplessness and induced disability.

Here's how it works in practice. Staff members tend to be generous, benevolent people and they are quick to identify situations that will allow them to be helpful to residents. The problem is that the more often these functions are taken over by the staff, the less likely the residents are to do such things for themselves—and the more helpless they become. The staff, always eager to help, thus tutor residents in the art of helplessness. Ever-rising levels of "assistance" progressively weaken the elder even as they reward the staff with feelings of accomplishment and generosity. The result is a remorseless downward spiral.

The Green House is based on a different self-reinforcing cycle. It begins with the belief that elderhood exists. It presumes a right to late-life development that is an essential component of the human life cycle. Such growth, while undoubtedly difficult, can also be understood to have worth and meaning. Those who live in [illegible] and care about a Green House share the duty to [illegible] of late-life development within [illegible]. Institutional language [illegible] the logi[illegible]

order, gives way to a more complex and nuanced understanding of aging. Illness, grief, and loss are reframed. They become elements of an ancient way of living that gradually brings emotions and relationships to the center of an elder's experience.

The words and ideas that surround the Green House have special importance. Culture is no accident and it never misses an opportunity to reinforce its shared beliefs with the power of habit. Because new ways of thinking demand a new lexicon, Green House language has been designed to match its culture. This vocabulary, some of which may sound strange at first hearing, helps protect the Green House from a thoughtless return to declinism.

intentional community *noun* A group of unrelated people who come together in order to share the deliberate pursuit of some noble aim. (Many, but by no means all, such communities have revolved around religious beliefs.) Intentional communities avoid excessive hierarchy and have a history of accepting into their midst those who have been cast out of society.

Green House *noun* An intentional community for elders built to a residential scale and devoted to the pursuit of the most positive elderhood possible. The value of clinical services is recognized and is then made part of a habilitative social framework that gives primacy to human development in late life.

habilitation *noun* The effort to bring forth existing but latent potential within a person or group of people. It is distinguished from *rehabilitation*—a term that presumes a defect to be rectified or a brokenness that must be repaired, whereas *habilitation* presumes wholeness.

well-being *noun* This is a much larger idea than either quality of life or customer satisfaction. It is based on a holistic understanding of human needs and capacities. Well-being is elusive, highly subjective, and the most valuable of all human possessions.

elder *noun* A person who, by virtue of age or life experience, has transcended or has the potential to transcend the limitations and shortcomings of adulthood; a mature person who gives precedence to BEING-doing in daily life.

elderhood *noun* The state of being and living as an elder. It is founded on the developmental potential that is latent in late life, and is as distinct from adulthood as adulthood is from childhood.

care *noun* The common use of this term in the language of the institution has perverted the word's true meaning. In the Green House, the universe of care is defined as those thoughts, words, and deeds that contribute to the growth of the people participating in its community. Care can include but is in no way limited to medical treatments.

treatment *noun* The provision of expert diagnostic and therapeutic interventions, which are all governed by credentialed medical and nursing professionals.

rhythm of daily life *noun* The pattern of behavior that best enhances the well-being of the people in the Green House. Because this pattern can be known only by paying attention to the needs and preferences of the people directly affected, the household does not operate on a predefined schedule. Elders eat meals, bathe, sleep, rest, and socialize at times they choose. Elders can, if they like, participate in homemaking, including meal planning and preparation, gardening, caring for household pets, cleaning, and doing laundry. This rhythm is created by and evolved through household decisions made jointly by people living and working in the Green House.

to welcome *verb* Intentional communities take great care to ensure that new members are properly welcomed into their midst. To be welcomed is to become known and to be accepted as a full member of the community, with a right to speak and be heard that is equal to that of every other member.

to befriend *verb* To pursue a knowing and affectionate relationship with others. This requires a deliberate commitment to make oneself known to others and to be known by others. To befriend is to allow for the possibility of cherishing others and being cherished by others in the ordinary manner of the everyday.

The Green House offers the roots of a language that is liberated from declinism and from the legacy of enforced dependency. It is not an attempt to change the culture of long-term care because it rejects the very idea of long-term care. It offers instead an intentional community that is devoted to fostering late-life development. The rewards and difficulties of elderhood are acknowledged and the people who work with the elders are given voice in the work of creating and sustaining the life of the Green House's intentional community.

Organization

Elders and senescents who choose to make their own Green Houses can learn much from those who create Green Houses for the most frail among us. The language of the institution typically paints these most-frail people as passive receivers of professional services. The Green House takes a different view. Elders whose health has declined to a substantial degree are the same people they have always been; what has changed is the manner in which they collaborate with others. Their longevity has changed the nature of their daily lives, making close cooperation essential. Because the person is the same and only the needs have changed, every Green House must do all that it can to see that no elder ever has to leave simply because of increasing frailty. This commitment to aging in place entails the coordination of priorities imposed by those who are paying for the care (in many cases a government agency) and the Green House's culture of word, thought, and deed.

Most of the people who are placed in nursing homes live there simply because their needs are greater than what their family or community can provide. In the later years of his life, Pope John Paul II was, medically speaking, eligible to be admitted to a nursing home. He remained in his own home only because the Holy See had the funds available to meet his needs. Few families, however, can match the resources of the Vatican. Our collective obsession with diagnosis and treatment notwithstanding, the real reason people go to live in a nursing home almost always relates to a mismatch between their needs and the resources available to the people who care most about them.

The typical resident in a nursing home receives only a couple of hours of hands-on care per day, and just a few minutes of attention from registered nursing personnel. From a practical point of view, it makes sense to organize the experience of daily life in the Green House around the daily affairs of eating, bathing, dressing, sleeping, celebrating when we can, and grieving when we must. The clinical needs of the people living in a Green House, while admittedly important and sometimes even urgent, should not be imagined to

be more important or necessarily more urgent than the pursuit of well-being.

The Green House can be organized along one of two basic lines: elder-initiated or organization-initiated. The elder-initiated house grows from the desire of a group of individuals to share living arrangements and the pursuit of the BEING-doing of elderhood. These houses will take many forms. Most will be organized by small groups of friends who are determined to enter elderhood together. The people who create elder-initiated Green Houses are likely, in the beginning, at least, to have relatively few medical or care needs. A Green House must, however, make arrangements to ensure that elders never have to face losing their place due to ill health. Otherwise, it is not a Green House.

The organization-initiated house will be created mostly by those who have been involved in some aspect of institutional long-term care and are ready to leave that era behind. These houses will be home to people who are likely to be very old and perhaps very frail and ill as well.

Whatever their genesis, all Green Houses use a similar organizational strategy. The terms defined in table 11 on the next two pages present the essential elements.

Our present system of housing and caring for elders is declinist to the very marrow of its bones. It prides itself on providing options for people at every point on the "going, going, gone" continuum, never pausing to reflect on what this sequence says about aging itself. The Green House does not accept the idea of this continuum. It is an intentional community and thus can nurture people of all abilities and disabilities. There will be a temptation to force the Green House into the usual scheme, something along the lines of "Green Houses—aren't they those teeny little nursing homes?" Or, more unexpectedly, "Green Houses—aren't those the communes for old boomers?"

In fact, the Green House is always willing to fly the most convenient flag available. If the circumstances call for licensing Green Houses as skilled nursing facilities so that a nursing home can be closed—permanently—then such licensure should be sought. (That is what happened in Tupelo.) In other situations, it will be better to

sponsoring organization	A sophisticated health-care delivery network that can ensure quality, provide expertise, organize back-up staffing, and deliver back-office support (e.g., account billing).	A group of senescents and elders who choose to create and then inhabit the intentional community of a Green House. They may form a corporate structure for legal and tax reasons.
constellation	A group of Green Houses all under the umbrella of a shared sponsoring organization. A Green House cannot exist in isolation. It must be part of a constellation that is itself linked to a sponsoring organization.	A large collective of Green Houses that rely on each other. The constellation fosters the well-being of each house in its range and benefits from a voluntary peer-to-peer support network.
clinical support team	An interdisciplinary team that includes the physician, the registered and licensed practical nurses, the occupational therapist, the physical therapist, the recreational therapist, the social worker, the dietitian, the speech therapist, and any other professionals needed by one or more elders. They are employed by the sponsoring organization and come to the Green House as honored guests. They embrace and are guided by the practices of home health care.	An interdisciplinary team that includes all of the health professionals on whom the elders of the Green House depend. The membership of this team will change as the needs of the elders change. The elders pay for their services just as they would if they had continued to live in their own homes.
guide	An adult nonresident employee of the Green House and the guardian of the culture of the Green House. The guide is part teacher and part preacher, advocating for the habits, beliefs, and practices of the Green House and defending against the intrusion of the old-age archipelago.	An adult nonresident employee of the Green House who can help the elders create the intentional community they desire. The guide coaches and mentors the elders to keep them on track as they develop and live in their intentional community.

sage	An elder volunteer who is living in the broader community, who understands the ideals of the Green House, and who has experience in helping small groups of people work out conflicts and make decisions. The sage has no operational responsibilities but can and does listen to those who live and work within the Green House.	An elder who is not living in the Green House but who is invited to participate in the life of the community. This volunteer brings the perspective and influence of an elder and helps Green House residents fulfill the tasks of elderhood.
social membrane	A barrier that delineates the social space inside the group from the rest of society. Large, impersonal bureaucracies have thick social membranes and discourage the easy movement of people and ideas into and out of its interior. The Green House cultivates the thinnest membrane that is consistent with the safety and well-being of the people who live and work there.	A barrier that delineates the social space inside the group from the rest of society. The Green House is not meant to be a one-house ghetto for older people who are afraid to live alone. It cultivates meaningful relationships with neighbors of all ages. It does not become a social center but serves the community even as the Green House is served by the community. Elderhood that does not touch the lives of its neighbors is not a worthwhile elderhood.
shahbaz	A person who works in a Green House with elders and is dedicated to (1) the enlargement of the skills and capacities that are latent within the elders, and (2) the pursuit of the most positive elderhood possible. A shahbaz is the midwife of a new elderhood. *Plural:* shahbazim	A person who works with elders once the capacity for mutual caregiving within the house has been reached.

operate along the lines of assisted living. Many more Green Houses will take root in neighborhoods and apartment buildings brought to life by elders themselves and carrying (at least at first) no special licensure. With regard to licensure and organization, the Green House is agnostic: it uses the regulatory and economic system that is most congenial to its mission of creating a sanctuary for elderhood. But always remember . . .

- A Green House that is licensed as a skilled nursing home is not a nursing home—it is a Green House.
- A Green House that is licensed as an assisted living facility should not be confused with such a facility—it is a sanctuary for elderhood.
- A Green House that is licensed as an adult home cannot be defined in only those terms—it is first and always a Green House.
- An elder-initiated Green House that closely resembles a family dwelling is no such thing—it is an intentional community, dedicated to fostering the most positive elderhood possible.

Elderhood blooms or withers in the context of daily life. Conventional long-term care regularly dismisses bathing, eating, and dressing as necessary but labor-intensive tasks. In contrast, the Green House relies on these necessities as primary sources of meaning and worth. (I will say more about this later.) An African proverb holds that it takes a village to raise a child, and in that same spirit we could say that it takes a community to grow an elder. Whatever legal forms it may operate under, the Green House serves as a vessel for just such an intentional community.

Environment

There is a staggering sameness in the design of long-term care facilities all over the industrialized world. The similarity derives in large part from a nearly universal emphasis on operational efficiency. The financial and organizational power that accompanies that goal will always tempt those who create Green Houses with the siren song of

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size and economy. After all, we have spent four decades "perfecting" the design of long-term care facilities, and the consensus of most experts in long-term care is that small intentional communities for elders cannot be cost-effective. The design of the Green House must face up to the difficulties of creating operational efficiencies without resorting to the logic of a large institution. The legacy of the nursing home may not be able to tell us what a Green House should be, but it can show us what it must never become.

The architecture of long-term care facilities reflects—in steel, brick, and tile—their fundamentally medical intention. Though the term *homelike* is often invoked, nursing home design actually gives its most careful attention to maximizing the efficient use of labor. Owners and operators of new and refurbished nursing homes take great pride in their equipment and facilities and, when a staff member gives a tour to a family member, these features are highlighted. The people who work there—often overworked, usually underpaid—are given far less attention.

These buildings give those within their walls little reason to suspect that elderhood can be a rich, rewarding phase of human development. Long corridors disable frail people, forcing them into wheelchairs. Massive dining rooms are impersonal and intimidating and promote anxiety. There is limited access to outdoor space. Double rooms (laughably called "semiprivate" rooms) and shared bathrooms invade privacy. Furniture, floor coverings, and drapery are matched consistently throughout, as if the place were a chain hotel rather than the home it is meant to simulate. The grim institutional appearance damages the well-being of staff and residents alike.

Rural, suburban, or urban, Green Houses are dwellings that house six to ten people. They belong in residential settings and should be good architectural neighbors. Some will be built into high-rise apartment buildings; others will be free-standing houses. Whatever form they take, there should always be as little distinction as possible between a Green House and the other housing nearby. In an ideal situation, a person looking for a Green House might pass it by because it is so inconspicuous. Inside the building, furnishings and decorations reflect the preferences of the elders of that community.

Elders fill the house, to the greatest extent possible, with their own furniture, art, and decorations. At its best, the interior of a Green House closely resembles the homes of other elders in the vicinity.

We know that people find pleasure in the company of animals, the laughter of children, and the growth of green plants, so every Green House must offer elders opportunities to be in contact with the living world that surrounds us all. We also know that privacy is important to life satisfaction, and so the design of a Green House must ensure that privacy is plentiful. In fact, every elder must be able to have his or her own room. Because they are smart, these houses take full advantage of unobtrusive technology that promotes well-being. Ceiling-track lifts help create a safe environment that is good for elders and helps protect the people who work with them from injury. Communications technologies can improve health through tele-health and tele-nursing. The intelligent use of adaptive devices helps those living and working in a Green House be more at ease.

During the years I searched for the best design elements for a Green House, I visited many people and places. All of them influenced me. In Saskatoon I was fascinated by the Sherbrooke Community Center and inspired by its village model of community living. In Boston I toured the Hearthstone facilities created by John Zeisel. As we bumped and juddered over the city's back streets, he told me that *focus* was Latin for "hearth." When we focus on something, we make it the center of our attention. The hearth is the center of a home, the place around which we arrange our living. Every Green House must have a center, a hearth around which the affairs of daily living may be arranged. Our deepest cultural memories suffuse the hearth with the twin pleasures of food and fire. The hearth includes an open kitchen and a large table around which meals are shared. The importance of having such an arrangement is confirmed by research showing that people living with dementia benefit from taking their meals in communal settings. Because the hearth is the center of the design, each elder's room opens onto this space. There are no long corridors.

Professional nurses enter into and work within the Green House using the home health care metaphor and thus have no need for a

fixed base of operations. Indeed, there is no evidence of the permanent presence of professional nurses. The nurses' station, long a fixture of the long-term care institution, has no place in a Green House. The medication cart is obsolete because elders' pills are kept in their rooms. There is no treatment cart and no chart rack because such things would be out of place in a private residence. The people of the Green House counter the tendency to medicalize their home by asking, "Can we find this in our neighbors' homes?" If not, then its use in the Green House must be seriously questioned. It is important to remember, though, that the Green House is not a private family home. Its design is meant to support a distinctive form of intentional community. It is a vessel that sails through time, taking the people who share its spaces ever further into the realm of elderhood.

Midwife of Elderhood

The Possibilities of *And*

While I was homeschooling my oldest son, it came time to teach him about chemical reactions. He understood that elements were the building blocks of chemical compounds but found it hard to believe that an explosive metal (sodium) and a poisonous gas (chlorine) could unite to make the salt he sprinkled on his french fries. Even more amazing, the two elements themselves would remain unchanged. What is new is the bond they have created with each other. It seems like magic, but it is even better than that—it's chemistry.

Fortunately, the workings of miraculous combinations can be found in the social world as well. Think of the singer and the song. Each can exist without the other, but each is diminished without the other. The classic song "Summertime" has been performed by many great singers.

> Summertime,
> an' the living is easy.
> Fish are jumpin'
> an' the cotton is high.

What would this song be without its greatest singers? People such as Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Al Green, and Janis Joplin took words and a tune, joined their voices together with them, and brought forth something new. Nor are they the only ones capable of such

alchemy. These kinds of pairings are all around us when we know where to look. Think of the conductor and the score, the game and the player, the poet and the rhyme, the actor and the role. Neither is the miracle confined to the worlds of sports, art, and music. The mother brings forth the child; the child brings forth the mother. The teacher instructs the student; the student educates the teacher.

These pairs are sometimes mistaken for opposites. They are actually complements—they complete one another. The error of mistaking them for opposites is a function of our general preference for the simplicity of having either A *or* B. We find the clash of opposites much easier to understand than the complexities that arise when we combine A *and* B. Ideas, in particular, are apt to be transformed in surprising ways when they are set free from the limited logic of opposition. The Christian instruction to "turn the other cheek" comes to mind. It fuses the polarity of *love* and *enemy* with revolutionary consequences. Today we are struggling with the cult of adulthood's insistence that people must be *either* independent *or* dependent. This tyranny damages our longevity and constricts our imagination. There are other possibilities—much better ideas that are capable of transforming childhood, adulthood, and elderhood. To find them we need only open our minds to the possibilities of *and*.

Beyond Independence

A human being cast away from society is as frail and vulnerable as a honeybee separated from its hive. The pain and suffering that accompany forced isolation are well understood and have long been a subject for art and literature. One of the first novels to examine this form of grief was *Robinson Crusoe,* by Daniel Defoe. Published in 1694, it remains a frightening tale of life lived outside the embrace of human society. Washed ashore after his ship is broken on the rocks, Crusoe's joy at surviving soon gives way to a bottomless grief. He is alive but condemned to a wretched life of loneliness and longing. In his anguish he tears at his clothes, pulls out hanks of hair, and pleads with God to let him die.

But he does not die. His survival is ensured when he salvages a trove of ironwork, rope, [illegible]

seeds, and tools from the hold of the ship. Even though he is alone on the island, it is the work of the gunsmiths, smelters, carpenters, weavers, and loggers of his homeland that make his survival possible. If circumstances had denied him access to the fruits of their labors, *Robinson Crusoe* would have been a short story rather than a novel.

Defoe's novel reveals and then strips bare the mythology of independence. His Crusoe gives ceaseless attention (devotion that would put a colony of honeybees to shame) to the mundane work of repairing, strengthening, and expanding the delicate fabric of his existence. His struggle is plainly at odds with the cinematic myth of the mountain man who seeks, and is somehow sustained by, the shelter of having no shelter. Any island castaway would be enraged by the Hollywood hero's insistence that true independence is being able to leave society behind. In terms of that myth, Robinson Crusoe was as independent as any human is ever likely to be. Day and night for thirty years he dreamed of being rid of that terrible independence.

Myth: *Being independent means relying as little as possible on other people.*

Reality: *Being independent means being able to define the manner in which one cooperates with others.*

The myth of independence is dangerous because it leads away from the truth of life. As members of the human species, we must cooperate or die. Dismissing our genius for working together, and instead lauding the myth of independence, gives rise to a perverse fear of dependence. For those who spend time thinking about longevity, but especially for the aged themselves, *dependence* is a dirty ten-letter word. And, like the concept of independence, it is subject to deliberate distortion.

Myth: *To be dependent is to be compelled to rely on others for the necessities of life.*

To be dependent is to be human. We all rely on others for [illegible] *form this reliance takes adds to or detracts from* [illegible] the misconceptions it has [illegible] those who come to [illegible] The myth con- [illegible] elrs in a

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avoid being imprisoned by these ideas if we allow ourselves
nowledge the simultaneous truths of our dependence and ind
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The aged can be independent (which is very good) or
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she can give birth unaided. Pregnant women have little use for the rhetoric of independence. They and their children have always relied on others for their safety and well-being. During the twentieth century, the practice of obstetrics made childbirth much less dangerous and far less painful than it used to be. Still, as any mother can tell you, plenty of pain and risk remain. Strange as it may seem, a look back at the recent history of childbirth can help us develop a new approach to aging and elderhood.

By the middle of the last century, the advantages of an intensively medicalized approach to childbirth were thought to be so complete that traditional ideas about birthing were dismissed or even actively condemned. It seemed, for a time, that the ancient practice of midwifery might disappear entirely from modern industrial societies, leaving only the obstetricians and their gleaming metal instruments. Fortunately for us all, this did not happen.

I attended many births during my family practice residency in the 1980s. At that time, there was a running battle between the family physicians, with whom I was allied, and the obstetricians, who were in charge of the labor deck, as it was then known. Both groups of physicians agreed that labor and delivery should be safe and carefully monitored. The conflict revolved around what the *experience* of the childbirth should be like. The obstetricians looked at parturition (the fancy medical name for childbirth) and saw a specialized surgical procedure. The family doctors, not surprisingly, saw a potentially meaningful event in the development of the family. The basic standards of medical practice were settled; the dispute was one of emphasis.

The debate that raged within the medical staff of the hospital went something like this:

Family doctors: "Natural childbirth is a safe alternative to conventional obstetric practice."
Obstetricians: "Is not."
Family doctors: "Is so."
Obstetricians: "Is not."
Family doctors: "Is so."
Obstetricians: "Is not."
Family doctors: "Is so."
Repeat *ad nauseam.*

To the surprise of many, this conflict was resolved not by the medical profession but by expectant mothers and their families. Social pressure for a safe but far less medicalized approach to childbirth overwhelmed the specialists. Now the birthing center has replaced the labor deck in every corner of the country. American mothers and their families no longer tolerate stirrups, leather restraints, glaring lights, and gleaming tile. Now hospitals and doctors boast of their ability to make childbirth a safe *and* richly rewarding experience.

Whenever we despair of the possibility of liberating our elders, we should remember that the forces of history tower over organizations like the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology. The revolutionary changes that transformed childbirth during the last quarter century were the product of two distinct social trends. First, advances in medical technology improved obstetric safety and outcomes. This relative feeling of safety is an important part of what made the new emphasis on the quality of the birthing experience possible. Second, a new generation of women (many but not all of them members of the baby boom) began to challenge the authority of doctors and question their rigorously clinical approach to labor and delivery. They sought out ideas and practices that were in harmony with their own beliefs about childbirth. These changes sparked a revolution that catapulted an obscure French obstetrician named Fernand Lamaze to worldwide fame. No longer would women be forced to choose an emotionally fulfilling experience *or* the medically sophisticated safety of obstetrics. Families could have both.

Understanding the rise of natural childbirth can help us renew our longevity. All of the forms and practices of natural childbirth can best be understood as a reformulation of the millennia-old legacy of midwifery. Lamaze succeeded because he embraced traditional ideas about birthing *and* clinical obstetrics. In the process, he created something new. The renewal of midwifery in the late twentieth century did not seek to restore the birthing practices of long ago. Few would ever have accepted such a dangerous step backward. Instead, it became a hybrid of old and new, different from anything that had come before. We are now preparing for a similar revolution that will transform elderhood and the lives of elders the world over.

Because traditional aging has always placed responsibility for the aged inside the family, there is no direct old-age equivalent to the midwife. Mitigated aging—with its morbidly negative view of old age and its fixation on the brokenness of the elderly—has presumed to have all the answers the aged need. Represented at its extreme by the old-age archipelago, mitigated aging is marching us all toward an old age defined by disease, disability, and death. This orientation is responsible for much of the dark pessimism that currently surrounds the idea of growing old. Fortunately, we can find hope in social conditions that increasingly resemble those that inspired the revolution in childbirth. The pattern is eerily similar:

1. Advances in technology are shown to outperform traditional practices and beliefs.
2. Long-established habits are overthrown and replaced with a shiny new technocratic regime that is run by professionals.
3. Popular revulsion against the new order grows and eventually matures into a direct challenge to professional practice.
4. Advocates for change wisely reject a simple return to old ways. Instead, they seek a fusion of old and new. The result is transformational social change that alters the terrain of society as a whole, often in profound and unexpected ways.

Perhaps more than anything else, old age needs its own midwife, someone who is prepared to be with older people as the familiar terrain of adulthood recedes into the past. We need people who can guide others toward the best elderhood possible. Seen from the proper vantage point, the prospect of enduring the rigors of old age without such assistance can be as daunting as the experience of giving birth alone. After all, labor and delivery last only hours, whereas elderhood (which is much more dangerous) extends for years, even decades. Like the midwife of childbirth, the midwife of elderhood will be a person outside the family who earns the family's trust and respect. Old age is and will remain difficult. Given the complex dangers and opportunities that define elderhood, we would do well to cultivate people who can help elders negotiate its passages.

One Million Strong

In the past, the nearest our society has come to creating a midwife for elderhood has been the development of frontline workers in the long-term care industry. However, that experience has fallen far short of almost everyone's expectations. The low pay, low prestige, and difficult work that define this occupation have led millions of these people to seek employment in other fields. Staff turnover in the nursing home industry is a staggering problem, averaging about 100 percent yearly and running as high as 400 percent. Inadequate staffing is a constant problem.

Like mining, deep-sea fishing, and logging, the business of long-term care is an extractive industry. Whereas those other industries measure their success in tons of ore, tons of fish, or board feet of lumber, the success of long-term care comes from its ability to extract good will and generosity directly from its own employees. As with all extractive enterprises, there is a limit to what can be taken: the long-term care strip mine now yields much less of the human heart than it used to. Increasingly, people are saying no to work as low-paid functionaries in sterile, unfeeling institutions. The nursing home can no longer depend on a steady flow of undemanding, extremely generous nurse aides, housekeepers, and dietary workers. More and more people now enter into this work unwilling to freely offer the gifts of compassion and tenderness that have so often saved the nursing home from itself. Much has been made of the age and archaic nature of the buildings that are used for nursing homes. Far more important and much less well recognized is the corrosive nature of the industry's labor practices.

The workforce crisis is being blamed on the millions who, despite their affection for elders, are choosing not to work in the old-age archipelago. Foundations, governments, and corporations in the long-term care arena are all investing large sums in workforce recruitment and retention strategies, with few of those strategies showing any signs of success.

The problems of staff absenteeism and worker shortage and dissatisfaction persist even though we already know what people who feel a calling to be with elders need in their work. Research supports each of the following staff needs:

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- Permanent assig
- Involvement in
- Self-managed v
- Better pay

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- Advanced training
- Permanent assignment
- Involvement in decision making
- Self-managed work teams
- Better pay

The industry has been trying to fill a sieve. It cannot bring itself to completely reconstruct the role given to those who have a hands-on relationship with elders because doing so would destroy the dependency-based management strategy that animates the old-age archipelago. The duality of "staff" and "resident," which is a cornerstone of the institution, must be dissolved before a twenty-first-century elderhood can come into existence. In its place we need a holistic concept that is large enough to contain both elders and the people with whom they cooperate.

For tens of thousands of years, children, adults, and elders were sustained by a complex multigenerational interchange that occurred predominantly within the context of the family. Despite the advantages of that tradition, we no longer have the luxury of fostering exchanges between young and old solely within the family. In its place, we must develop an approach that embraces midwifery's legacy of extrafamilial reciprocity. While the midwife helps bring forth the child, mothers and their children, over the decades, return the favor by leading the midwife toward mastery of her craft. In just this way, those who cooperate with elders as they negotiate the challenging passages of elderhood must, in turn, be nurtured by the elders with whom they work. They need each other. They complete each other. This approach goes far beyond rewriting job descriptions and instituting empowerment programs. It requires a revolution. We will be witness to the rise of a new pattern of collaboration in old age that will dwarf the changes we saw in childbirth in the twentieth century.

Our society needs a hundred thousand Green Houses, intentional communities within which the gifts of elderhood can be given and received. We must also bring forth, in the first half of this century, one million midwives of elderhood. This will be an epic effort, with its own stories and heroes.

The First Shahbaz

The Myth of Origin

I once had the opportunity to work with a small group of people who were interested in developing new programs and services in the field of aging. Over the course of several meetings, the participants laid out their projects, goals, and ambitions. In particular, I remember Nora Gibson. She told us of her dream of creating neighborhoods capable of keeping elders at home. Her ideas were just taking shape and she struggled with the definition of what a "neighborhood" is or should be. Near the end of our time together, it became clear that the words she was using to describe these neighborhoods were not conveying the richness and depth of what she had in mind. Her ideas needed to be clothed in narrative language. She needed a story that could explain exactly what she meant.

There was a lull in the conversation and an older woman, a Catholic nun who had said little up to that point, spoke up. She told the story of the founder of her order—how, more than a century earlier, this woman had been seized by a passion to serve others. She told the tale the way, I am sure, it had been told a hundred thousand times over the course of a century. When she finished, the group was silent. We had just received the very essence of the founding myth. The story was powerful because those who heard it understood at once the source of this woman's calling, her work, and her place in the world.

e story was a gift to us all but especially to Nora, she left the sea
with her energy renewed and a commitment to find and then tell
story.

who would dedicate themselves to helping others grow
positive elderhood possible must have their own myth.
llows as their story, the tale of the first Shahbaz.

Shahbaz the Falcon

NOBODY GETS THROUGH LIFE WITHOUT TROUBLES, but there was once a king who got himself into a terrible fix. He wasn't bad, just a man who lost his way. Nothing new there. Plenty of people, kings and commoners alike, head straight into trouble—often without a single look back. This man did stop to think, and that made all the difference.

The land the king ruled was far from the sea, far from the overland trade routes, far, it seemed, from any place anyone wanted to be. Still, his subjects were a sturdy lot. They endured, meeting hardship with a laugh and a smile whenever they could. The people comforted each other with the old saying "A poor man living in peace is better off than a rich man in the midst of strife." Deep inside, they held the hope that someday things would get better.

Early in his reign, the king kept to his father's custom of moving among the people, listening to their stories, laughing at their jokes. He held court so that the people could seek justice from him. But the temptations of power proved too great. Gradually, he set the old ways aside. He began staying up all night, scheming with his ministers and playing the lords and ladies against each other. Heavy black curtains were hung over the windows in his room and he slept until noon. Every day, after lunch, he called for his falcon and went hunting. This he loved above all else. At dinner, his belly full of ale, he would often roar, "Shahbaz!" for that was the falcon's name. "Shahbaz has never failed, and that is more than I can say for any of you."

Life got worse, not better. The kingdom grew disorderly. Fights broke out. Bandits prowled the ridgetops and forests. Brother turned against brother, friend against friend. The people became afraid, and Shahbaz saw it all. Her keen eyes found a house in flames, a woman crying, a child dressed in rags. She returned each day with game for the king's table, but something was changing inside her.

One day as she wheeled through the deep blue sky, Shahbaz saw an old man stumbling in a thicket. He had been chased from the roadway by a band of brigands and now was lost. Shahbaz lifted her left wing and arced slowly toward him. As she drew closer, she could see that he was cowering in fear. A mountain lion had cornered him and was preparing to pounce.

Now, for the first time, the falcon's heart filled with compassion for a human being. This warm feeling melted all doubt. Shahbaz tucked her wings and dove. Streaking out of the sky like an angel of mercy, she thrust out her talons and buried them in the lion's neck. The beast roared as it struggled to free itself from the falcon's grip. Teeth, claws, beak, and talons whirled in a terrifying struggle until, at last, the lion surrendered. Shahbaz released her grip and took flight; the lion fled in terror. The man was bewildered by what he had seen but thankful for his safety. Shahbaz returned to the king but had no game for his table. He berated her, not noticing how worn and weary she appeared.

The next day the king went out to hunt with Shahbaz on his arm. In the midday heat, he released the tresses and the falcon took flight. Immediately, she set a course for the place where she had protected the old man. She found him even farther from the road. He had wandered into a ravine where there was no food or water. The afternoon sun beat down on him. Again Shahbaz brimmed with compassion. Putting aside the task the king had given her, she descended from the sky and landed in front of the astonished man. Shahbaz was made mighty by the power of her loving-kindness, and she knew just what to do. With a short hop, she came to a large stone. With her beak she struck the stone—once, twice, thrice. The rock split open and water—clean, cold water—flowed from its depth. The thirsty man drank.

Shahbaz took wing and hunted, returning to the old man with game. Then, before leaving, she approached a pile of brush, strik-

ing it with her beak once, twice, thrice. With that, it burst into flames. Having sustained the man with food, water, and fire, she took wing and returned to the waiting king, having once again failed to supply the king's table.

"Perhaps I have been feeding you too well," he snapped. "A night without supper might focus your mind."

The next day the king went as usual to the hunting grounds and released his falcon. She hurtled skyward and sought the lost man. The search was long and difficult, and she feared that he had died. At last, she glimpsed him in the distance. Weak with hunger, she made her way there. He was alone and in despair. As Shahbaz settled down on a branch, he looked up at her through tear-filled eyes. The remarkable creature who had fought off a mountain lion, fed him, and given him water and a fire had returned to him.

Thinking that perhaps this magical creature might understand his grief, he poured out his heart to Shahbaz. His brothers were dead, as were his wife and their children. He had been seeking his father's village when the bandits had attacked him. He and his family had suffered greatly in this time of violence and disorder, and it was all due to that fool of a king. As the great falcon listened, loving-kindness stirred once more within her breast.

Moved by the man's story, the falcon now found the gift of speech. She spoke of knowing love and loss. She spoke of all that she had seen in the many years she had soared above the kingdom. She told the man not to despair; she knew the way to his ancestral home. She stayed with him through the night, lulling him to sleep with stories of the great and noble people she had seen and known. When the morning dawned, she took flight and led the man to a stream that flowed into the river that lay beside the village of his father. This done, she returned to the king's castle.

Alighting on the castle wall, she found the king preparing for a hunt—with another falcon on his arm. As the hunting party went forth, Shahbaz moved to a low branch that hung over their path. The king saw her and condemned her loudly as an unworthy traitor. Shahbaz, he said, no longer deserved to be known as a royal falcon. Another bird could take her place—it did not matter to him. The king's fury was great, but Shahbaz did not stir. Instead, she fixed him in her gaze. Finally, his rage spent, the king turned away.

Then Shahbaz spoke: "I have watched you and I have watched your kingdom. You think highly of yourself, but you have ruled poorly. The people suffer; they cry out from fear, from hunger and thirst. They are lost, and yet you hear them not."

The king and his men listened in stunned silence. Then a royal counselor cried out, "This is an abomination. No such beast should have the power of speech; this is surely the work of an evil hand. I plead with your majesty to destroy this foul creature at once." At this, an archer drew his bow and aimed at the falcon.

Shahbaz did not flinch; she kept her keen, unwavering gaze upon the king. Silence hung in the air, and then she spoke again: "You are not a bad man. You could do much for the people of this land, even yet. But you must change."

Again the counselor cried out for permission to kill Shahbaz. The king waved him off. In the long, stony silence that followed, the king's mind returned to his youth. He remembered the peaceful days of his boyhood when he first went hunting with his grandfather and the great man's royal falcons. Soothed by these memories he, at last, allowed her words to enter his heart.

Shahbaz offered the king a partnership. She and her kind would sail the skies above this land, seeking always to protect, sustain, and nurture the people. The king would put down his scepter and his crown and become a royal falconer, devoting himself to the training and well-being of the royal falcons.

With time, the man who had been king became a skilled falconer. All of these great birds came to be known by the name of the first, each a shahbaz. This is how the people of this land found peace and comfort at last. Whenever they looked into the great blue sky, they could find a shahbaz there. The days of the king and his servants passed from memory and a new partnership—between the people and the royal falcons—came into being and endures even to this day. No one can remember a time when the morning light did not reveal a shahbaz circling high overhead.

Shahbazim

The conviction that we need a new framework around which to organize the experience of those who protect, sustain, and nurture our elders came to me early in my exploration of longevity. Much more challenging was the selection of a name for the people who would pursue these goals. I ransacked dictionaries in search of an English word or phrase that would convey the proper meaning. All of the words that might have served the purpose were tangled up with meanings that reinforced the tyranny of dependence and independence. I finally chose the word *shahbaz* precisely because it is unfamiliar. It is a Persian word that means, literally, "royal falcon." More than a few people have argued that the word is too strange, too foreign, and too unfamiliar. (This in spite of the fact that English has borrowed many words from Persian, including the very familiar *paradise* and *bazaar*.) While there is a price to be paid for such unfamiliarity, the word does free us from the sediment that has accumulated around English words such as *worker, assistant,* and *helper*.

The story of the original Shahbaz is the founding myth of a new way of being with and working with elders. The story dramatizes the transforming exchange that occurs between the old man and the falcon. The bird protects, sustains, and nurtures the elder even as the elder brings forth from the falcon new strengths, new powers, and new capacities. The result of this collaboration is the overthrow of a dysfunctional status quo. Together, the old man and the falcon bring about changes that make life better for all those in the kingdom—including the man who had been king.

In the modern industrial economy, the kinship group, in its stripped-down nuclear form, can no longer serve as the sole source of support for elders. Increasing numbers of families now rely on a non-familial system of therapists, services, and organizations. The people who work within this system are often generous and big-hearted, but the organizations themselves do not know love, cannot know love, and, indeed, reject the idea that love could form the basis for a reconsideration of our longevity. The rigorous application of professionalism and therapy expels love from the experience of elderhood.

The demand for what we now know as "paid caregivers for the elderly" exceeds the supply of people willing to do this work, and the imbalance is growing. This shortage is a direct consequence of the long-term care industry's perverse habit of confining good people within narrow task-driven jobs. They are asked to perform extremely challenging work at low pay and with little security. In exchange for a meager paycheck, they are expected to give themselves completely to their work and the people they serve. A shahbaz, in contrast, is a big person in a big job. Not only does a shahbaz protect, sustain, and nurture elders as individuals, a shahbaz also cooperates with elders to create a new society-wide understanding of elderhood. The elder and the shahbaz go together like a wink and a smile. Some of the people doing this work, like the falcon in the story, will begin as dutiful servants to an ungrateful king. The power of loving-kindness transformed a falcon into a mythic creature with the power to change its world. It will do the same for the people who choose the way of the first Shahbaz.

The plural of *shahbaz* is *shahbazim* (shah-bah-ZEEM). It, admittedly, sounds strange to the English speaker's ear. The *im* ending is drawn from Hebrew, whereas the root *(shahbaz)* is Persian. The mixing of these two languages is deliberate. The shahbazim are, themselves, something new. They draw on and contribute to many traditions, professions, and patterns of belief. They are allies of the new elderhood and will stand shoulder to shoulder with the nurses, doctors, and therapists whose skills also contribute to the well-being of elders. Their myth of origin makes their intention clear: They will "sail the skies above this land, seeking always to protect, sustain, and nurture the people."

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protection into a suffocating pattern of control. To understand why this is so, and how the "duty to protect" became a point of fierce dispute within the long-term care community, we need to revisit some important points in the history of protecting the old.

The Senior Citizen

Adults who deny the existence of elderhood actively oppose the concept of special rights for the old. Adulthood, with its attendant rights (and those rights are glorious), is said to offer sufficient protection for all adults no matter what their age. To think otherwise undermines the cherished "adulthood forever" fiction. Even so, age matters, and given the way declinism has been used against the aged, many older people have decided that the best defense against ageism is to deny that age is ever relevant. The idea of a vibrant elderhood as a *distinctive* continuation of a lifelong developmental process is but a murmur next to the extraordinary chorus of millions of older people proclaiming their devotion to permanent active adulthood.

The ancient idea of a community that *includes* elders conflicts with the modern vision of a society that happens to include people who, through no fault of their own, are "differently aged." Viewed from this perspective, the declaration that "the shahbazim have a duty to protect the elders with whom they work" seems demeaning and superfluous. Special treatment for elders, long a precious dividend of longevity, is being cast aside in favor of uniform treatment for all.

When the privileges of age are exchanged for a place at the adult bargaining table, older people must lobby ceaselessly for their fair share. To its credit, this strategy has ensured that the levers of a democratic society remain within their reach. The flaw, however, is fundamental and, I think, irremediable. It creates a ceaseless demand for civic engagement, lobbying, and competitive struggle. This necessity snares the old in the thicket of political struggle.

When the role of elders in society is converted into interest-group politics, the most frail, the most ill, and the most demented are also the most likely to lose. Whether they live in a remote tribal society or a modern nation-state, elders should be one step removed from the

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That the "helping professions" have placed themselves above the community is evident from the language they use to describe their work. They serve the community the way a president serves the people. They *meet the needs of* the community. They *provide care to* the elderly members of the community. On first reading, this comes across as a dedication to service and the general betterment of society. Hidden in these sentences, though, is a proud insistence that professional techniques and technology exist outside the community and are thus to be governed only by the professionals themselves.

This distinction might seem to be nothing more than semantics until we look closely at a situation in which the ethic of professional autonomy played itself out with disastrous consequences for our elders. Exhibit One in the case against relying on professionals for the protection of elders is the not-yet-extinguished practice of tying older people to beds, chairs, and railings. For decades intelligent, empathetic professionals refined the bizarre logic of "physical restraint." Fancy vocabulary aside, their efforts amounted to the rationalization of bondage for the geriatric set.

Being restrained against one's will, even by a benevolent authority, violates a basic human right. This plain truth was papered over with the argument that, however unpleasant the locks and straps might be, they served the greater good of protecting older people from injuries related to falls. The concern was easily justified; a fall can be a serious, even fatal event. Hundreds of thousands of older people (possibly including someone you loved) have perished after falling. An ounce of prevention, the professionals argued, is better than a pound of cure, especially when the stakes rise to the level of life and death.

Professionals of all stripes came together in a common cause to persuade elders (along with their wives, husbands, brothers, sisters, sons, and daughters) that tying them to their beds was both right and necessary. I have been in many meetings in which well-trained, compassionate nurses soothed the qualms of family members with the honey of their professional authority. When that did not work, those who resisted the use of restraints were treated to a full measure of professional and organizational disapproval. Few could resist such power.

In the end, the argument for holding the elderly in physical bondage relied on the idea that the restraints protected older people from injury. A professional, hands on hips, would proclaim that restraint use was necessary because "my license is at stake if he falls and hurts himself." The professional duty to protect was given clear precedence over the patient's right to dignity and freedom of movement. The decision to use physical restraints was removed from the realm of personal choice and transferred to the standards of practice that every nurse and doctor was duty bound to uphold. Those standards were clear, and as onerous and undignified as the restraints might be, their use was justified by the "fact" that they saved lives. This placed families at a permanent disadvantage in any discussion about restraints. Lay people rarely prevail against the weight of professional opinion.

The argument for physical restraints crumbled as evidence accumulated that these devices killed, injured, and humiliated far more people than they helped. The professionals were wrong. Dead wrong. The result was a loud, angry, prolonged struggle that is not yet fully resolved. While the professionals debated the wisdom of retreating from their established position, thousands of people were strangled by restraints that were intended to protect them. Millions of others were stripped of their dignity as they pleaded with staff members to untie them and take them to the toilet. Still, committees parsed the language of new professional standards. The evidence accumulated, the body count rose, but many professionals continued to label the "restraint-free care" movement as a softheaded initiative led by uninformed and irresponsible laypeople.

The struggle over this question remains intense. Even after more than a decade of debate, people are still being confined against their will in nursing homes all across America. The numbers are decreasing, but restraints remain a fact of life in thousands of facilities. Given the intensity of the struggle and the fact that it is not yet won, it should not come as a surprise that the battle to eradicate restraint use by those who work with elders has created a stinging resentment of the supposedly benign protection afforded by "professional standards."

The shahbazim have a duty to protect the elders with whom they work. Now it might be easier to see why these words, spoken at a gathering of advocates for elders and elderhood, provoked angry dissent. People recoiled from the idea of giving any group a paternalistic license to protect and thereby govern the lives of elders. Like generals who always seem to fight the last war, we risk getting bogged down in past debates and losing sight of the essential truth that elders need and deserve our protection. The debate over physical restraints and the dominance of professional opinion has obscured the richness that does exist within the concept of protection. When understood correctly, protection can be an important part of fostering well-being and enriching the lives of those engaged in late-life development.

We do have access to another form of protection, one that is much more subtle. Protection can, in fact, be given and received among equals. This approach is founded on the principle of reciprocity rather than on the helplessness of the frail in the face of adult vigor. Human beings are easily moved to protect what they value and come freely to the defense of that which is dear to them. Millions have given their very lives for their faith, their rights, and their way of life. These intangibles are protected because they are cherished. We must employ this ethic as the basis of our own protection of the elders we cherish.

The contrast between the two forms of protection can be seen in the waiting room of any family doctor's office. Near the window sit an aging mother and her daughter. The daughter is at ease and takes pleasure in her mother's company. The ravages of age and disease are acknowledged and accepted for what they are. The daughter anticipates and moves to meet her mother's needs quietly and unobtrusively. Protection is offered and received subtly and with grace. This makes the exchange easy to overlook.

By the door, and hard to miss, are a querulous daughter and her agitated mother. The daughter makes note of and then broadcasts each of her mother's failings. She deliberately draws attention to the burden she has shouldered and seeks approval for the difficult work of contending with her mother's decrepitude. This display is deliber-

ately made public because it reinforces their change in status. The daughter is in charge now and no one (least of all her mother) will be allowed to forget that.

Coming to the aid of a person as an equal ennobles both parties. The crucial difference, and the one that cleaves the issue plainly for the shahbazim, is the difference between doing something *with* another person and doing something *to* that person. We are entitled to do things *to* those who are subordinate to us, while we are obliged to collaborate *with* those who are our equals. As adults, the shahbazim are very different from the elders with whom they work. That difference is the basis for a rich collaboration—not a rationale for control.

Living in the Real World

With this distinction in mind, how should a shahbaz use the "duty to protect"? Elders should be protected from unnecessary illness and injury, but such efforts must be limited to practices that dignify both the elder and the shahbaz. Two questions must be asked and answered over and over again:

- Does this protection enlarge the capacity of the elder to experience the richness of elderhood?
- Does this protection promote the development of the shahbaz?

These are not difficult concepts. When we encounter them in the context of childhood education, they have the ring of common sense. Just imagine what would become of a teacher who protected children from playground injuries and taunting by tying them to their desks during recess. The scandal would make headlines. It is the very fact that children are cherished that protects them from such degradation. The shahbazim give protection and are repaid in the currency of human growth and well-being—the elders' and their own. *Shahbazim have a duty to protect the elders with whom they work.*

Convivium

Wants Versus Needs

The elements required for human survival are simple and few. A person can get along with a couple thousand calories a day, a liter of water, a sprinkling of vitamins and minerals, and a steady supply of air to breathe. Shelter that offers protection from the extremes of the weather and predatory activity (human and animal) is important as well. More than we might suppose, though, human life also depends on easy access to affection. It is affection that brings meaning and purpose to the mundane affairs of daily life.

Even after many years of working with older people, I continue to be amazed at the way advanced age prunes the overgrown wants and desires of adulthood. Very old people rarely, if ever, covet material symbols of status, rank, and wealth. Chasing after the totems of adulthood grows wearisome with age and is often given up entirely. Those living in the late decades of life are not like the young. They can easily be content with far less than what the average adult demands. Still, we hear the constant and often bitter complaint that the needs of the elderly are bound to bankrupt us. The old, some say, are a luxury the young can ill afford.

Ageist rhetoric aside, what can we say about sustaining our elders? This is a question that a shahbaz studies carefully. The second duty of the shahbazim (the first being to protect) is to sustain the eld-

ers with whom they work. Fulfillment of this duty requires an understanding of what makes life worth living.

Food

Some people eat to live. Others live to eat. Those in the first group regard food as fuel; those in the second group know better than that. Good food has always offered people much more than just calories, fat, carbohydrates, and protein. At its best, food nourishes us—body and soul. A meal can embody powerful symbols of love and acceptance. The bond between comfort and food, which begins at the breast, is fortified throughout childhood and gains renewed strength in the late decades of life. Properly prepared, the meals we cook and serve to our elders should be drenched in memory, ritual, and culture.

Reacting to case reports of actual starvation among nursing home residents, the government has established significant penalties for facilities that allow residents to lose weight "unexpectedly." As a result, nursing homes struggle constantly to increase the dietary intake of their residents. Just how challenging a task they have undertaken becomes obvious when you look at how these facilities prepare and serve food.

They shop from industrial food catalogues and unload the groceries from a tractor trailer parked at the loading dock. Meals are prepared in vast industrial kitchens that are deliberately isolated from the people who will eat what they produce. Some long-term care facilities, like airlines, outsource food production entirely and take delivery of dinners by the truckload. In a down-to-the-minute ballet, food is rushed upstairs in huge rumbling carts. Staff members distribute it to waiting residents as quickly as they can. It is a never-ending challenge to serve hot food when it is still hot and cold food when it is still cold.

The people involved do their best. The realities of large-scale food service demand, however, that the material characteristics of the food—its color, viscosity, temperature, and nutritional content—become its most important descriptors. The emphasis on consistency and low cost is constant. Food is shorn of meaning, leaving only numerical measurements. The lifelong rhythm of good food shared

within the circle of family life is absent. It is just not possible to imbue six hundred meals a day with the essence of love.

The Romans had a special term for the particular pleasure that accompanies sharing good food with people we know well. They called this experience *convivium*. The word has enjoyed a revival recently. The "slow food" (an alternative to fast food) movement has seized on the word as a way of describing dining experiences that are rich in meaning. Fresh, local ingredients prepared according to authentic regional recipes are served to people eager to share. They use smell, taste, and texture as a springboard to good conversation and vital relationships. The shahbazim foster a convivium that enriches the lives of elder and shahbaz alike.

The relationship between people and the food that sustains them begins with the planning that by necessity must precede each meal. The idea that meals can and should be planned with loving care and then prepared with loving hands will strike the typical food service manager as little more than wishful thinking. For the rest of us, it is simple common sense confirmed by our own experiences in our own homes. The suffering created by the industrialization of food in long-term care institutions deserves more than passing attention. Nursing homes are canaries in the mine, warning us of the assembly-line approach to food that is spreading across our social landscape. We are all losing our grip on convivium. Institutions may be able to blame their mechanical approach to food on their own gigantic size, but we can see the erosion of convivium all around us, even in our own lives.

The ability to create and maintain convivium demands an appreciation of the long, languorous meal and is one of the core competencies of a shahbaz. Time must be taken because food tastes better when it is soaked in anticipation. Elsewhere, soup may be purchased in bulk, heated, and then served. The shahbaz insists that soup be made fresh and be allowed to simmer all morning long with ingredients added slowly as the hours pass. In an institution, mealtime is a mad rush. For the shahbaz it is an opportunity to create and then deepen meaning. The spirit of convivium calls upon us to linger, to savor, and to draw strength not just from the food we are blessed to eat but also from the people with whom we are blessed to share our meal.

Shelter

The conventional long-term care facility has struggled with, but never satisfactorily resolved, its split personality. As Mr. Hyde, it poses as a home. In its propaganda, the long-term care facility tells its staff members that "this is the residents' home; we just work here." Meanwhile, Dr. Jekyll maintains, with full professional authority, that the facility is actually a "health care services workplace." Despite the rhetoric about home, Dr. Jekyll rules this roost. The proof is easy to come by. Just watch the employees and note the way they control space, time, and people in their building. Imagine a similar group of well-meaning professionals entering your bedroom while you are sleeping and carrying on their work without regard for your desire for privacy or rest. Staff rules.

I highlight this conflict because in a time when protecting people from wind, rain, snow, and the heat of the summer sun poses little challenge, the real difficulty lies with creating an effective social shelter. In an affluent society, housing is available to all but the most unfortunate (and could be made available to them as well). A social shelter, though, is much more difficult to come by. The tension between the formality of the institution and the ease of a home is familiar to a shahbaz. Just as the shahbaz transcends "food service," choosing to practice convivium in its place, the shahbaz has a similar devotion to the art of homemaking.

Few social institutions have fallen as far and fast as homemaking. Once the object of glorification (as a female pursuit), homemaking is now belittled. Many no longer regard it as a legitimate pursuit for skillful people. The identification of homemaking with unpaid female labor inside the nuclear family too often served as a prop for the sexist denial of equal rights for women in the workplace. The sustained attack on homemaking as an unnatural sexist institution has created its own collateral damage. It has obscured some of the craft's very real virtues. There is much to be gained by retrieving homemaking from the ash heap of history (or at least popular opinion), dusting it off, and putting it to a new use.

Affection

By medicalizing old age, the cult of adulthood has degraded an ancient commitment to sustaining elders. The injection of massive government funding into the field of aging has benefited millions but has also forever altered the family's relationship with its elders. Long-term care's obsessive concern with medical treatment springs from society's deliberate equation of aging with illness. In the early 1960s, advocates for the elderly faced a situation in which millions of older people were both poor and sick. They made a strategic decision to channel needed resources through the health care system rather than the welfare system. Medicare and Medicaid were given dominion over the care of the aged, and these programs pumped trillions of dollars into improving the health of older Americans.

Along the way, a powerful industry has grown up around these programs. Being fed by health care dollars, this industry has little reason to imagine that the most important aspects of elderhood might have little to do with medical and surgical therapies. So complete is the medical-industrial domination of aging that people who need long-term assistance can be compelled, for purely economic and political reasons, to live out their lives within the sick role, tended to in medical facilities.

This is how the concept of "professional distance" came to be injected into the lives of millions of elders. An unquestioned assumption held by millions of professionals, this idea holds that unnecessary closeness and undue affection for patients is to be avoided. Doctors and nurses have long held that personal attachment to a patient could cloud one's thinking and lead, at a critical moment, to an error of judgment. This logic continues to reign, virtually unquestioned, in the acute care and hospital sectors of our health care system. Even so, it is spectacularly ill suited to the needs of our elders and those who work with them.

Rightly claiming that the aged are much more likely than the young to fall ill, health care professionals continue to perpetuate the fallacy that old age is mostly a medical problem. The need for medical and nursing services is assessed with precision and then used to

justify payments made by the government to the long-term care facility. As I have noted, the need for health care services is rarely if ever the only reason an elder is made to leave home and enter an institution. The old, like the young, do fall ill. But, unlike the young, the old can be compelled to make illness the center point of their lives. Old age, like all the other phases of our lives, should be about life and living.

Treating aging as a medical condition that must be managed with the professional distance prescribed by the medical model is wrong and leads to terrible suffering. Virginia Bell and David Troxel have written powerfully about this in their book *The Best Friend's Approach to Alzheimer's Care.* They argue persuasively that the proper metaphor for organizing our thinking in this area is not the distant clinical reserve of the professional but the open and engaged warmth of a best friend.

Shahbazim develop their relationships with elders within the distinctly nonmedical framework of befriending. This perspective creates daunting challenges that require both skill and maturity to overcome. The idea of befriending elders is sure to raise the hackles of medical professionals. They can object, with some justification, that encouraging the bond of friendship between elders and shahbazim opens a door to abuse and manipulation. Preventing "overinvolvement" and manipulation of residents by facility staff members is one of the primary aims of the medical model of care. Anyone who has worked, even briefly, in a long-term care facility knows how diligently the boundary between staff and residents is patrolled.

Even so, the deliberate separation of residents from the staff creates its own brand of suffering. Imagine yourself surrounded by people ostensibly pledged to care for you but discouraged from knowing you as a person. Nor are they permitted to share their humanity, their story, with you. Imagine living with a burning thirst and being denied the crisp, cool water that is kept intentionally just beyond your reach.

There is one other objection that can be raised against befriending as an organizing concept for the shahbazim. Getting close to elders who are, admittedly, themselves close to the end of their lives

is said to be a prescription for burnout. Professionals tell us that, as much as they might like to do so, they cannot afford the luxury of having deep feelings for people under their care. Because this work demands that they spend a great deal of time with frail and elderly people, having emotional attachments to patients could lead to a paralyzing grief with each death. This notion turns the "It is better to have loved and lost" adage on its head and concludes, quite forcefully, that it is better not to have loved at all.

Recent surveys of people who work with elders have found that the number one reason people stay in the field is the opportunity to create and sustain meaningful relationships with elders. This is a remarkable finding, considering that the weight of professional practice and regulatory enforcement is balanced against this tendency. It hurts to lose a friend, but the pain of not befriending is even greater. The true cause of burnout is the deadening effect of closing one's emotions to people who are in obvious need of a human connection. Human life is sustained by affection.

The purest form of friendship is found among equals. So it is with the shahbazim. They leave the cloak of professional authority and distance for others to wear, knowing that they are and will remain the equals of the elders. *Shahbazim have a duty to sustain the elders with whom they work through the practices of convivium, homemaking, and befriending.*

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Though we like to suppose otherwise, the richest forms of human development are most available to those willing and able to interweave their needs and their potential with the needs and potentials of others. The oldest of the old have always been our most important teachers. They instruct us not with words or memories of times long ago; they teach us with their selves. As time leads them to rely ever more closely on others, they offer us the opportunity to care for them. They bring into our lives the realization that all life is precious. Through them, we begin to understand how caregiving makes us human. We remember, generation after generation, that there is a vital and never-to-be-forgotten distinction between the withered husk of the body and the beauty of the human being that body still shelters.

I delved into the question of a midwife for elderhood because elders and elderhood cannot and should not be considered in isolation. It is true that most older people manage well enough on their own, content with their waning independence and not needing or wanting help from others on a day-to-day basis. But this book is not about individual satisfaction. It is about our society, the lives we make with and for each other, and the direction we are moving as a people. It is about human liberation.

We know that the old way of being old is passing away. Ancient understandings about elderhood are crumbling under the assault of adulthood. At the same time, we are being tempted by a new faith in medical technology and pharmaceutical laboratories. The most disastrous conclusion we could reach would be that our longevity can be embraced as an individual phenomenon—a race against time that must be run, and lost, alone. There are, all around us, enlightened adults who are eager to remind others that elderhood (and with it, true longevity) can only exist as an active exchange between generations. Any consideration of aging that does not include all parties to those transactions is doomed to failure. *Shahbazim have a duty to nurture the elders with whom they work.* The shahbazim need the elders. The elders need the shahbazim. Together they can renew the ancient virtues of elderhood.

The Work of Shahbazim

Shahbazim have a duty to protect the elders with whom they work. They always ask, "Does the protection that I am offering—

- enlarge the capacity of the elder to experience the richness of elderhood and
- promote the development of the shahbaz?

Shahbazim have a duty to sustain the elders with whom they work. A shahbaz—

- practices the art of convivium,
- values the craft of homemaking, and
- honors the act of befriending.

Shahbazim have a duty to nurture the elders with whom they work. They know that—

- fulfillment can be found within the most basic routines of everyday life,
- the shahbazim need the elders and the elders need the shahbazim, and
- together they can help renew the ancient virtues of elderhood.

Elderhood Reborn

Choosing Elderhood

Our culture declares that adulthood is forever, that old age means decline, and that perfection is lodged in remaining young. These great lies stand behind all the propaganda against aging and longevity. The truth is that old age is difficult, but it is essential because it teaches us how to live like human beings.

Our society needs a reconstructed elderhood that can serve as an effective alternative to the conspiracy of adulthood. We cannot return to the old age of the hunter-gatherers, and we are especially ill served by the nostalgic haze that surrounds our views of traditional aging in agricultural and pastoral societies. Mitigated aging has done much to lessen pain and suffering in old age, but as the inspiration for institutional long-term care, its defects have been made plain in the bleakness of the nursing home and the dread that fills all who enter there. Clearly, an elderhood that is capable of saving our future and our world must transcend the limits that have defined aging in the past.

Fortunately, art and imagination have been preparing the way for historic change. For well over a century, poets and sages have reflected on what old age could be and have dared to imagine a new old age. Together they have prepared a vision of aging as a *continuation* of human development. We can trace this vision from Alfred, Lord Tennyson to Barry Barkan to today's writers and researchers.

Tennyson's "Ulysses"

In his poem "Ulysses," written in 1842, Alfred Tennyson presents a new kind of elderhood. A complex work with many classical allusions, "Ulysses" explores two related themes. The first stanzas consider the turbulence created by the emerging industrial economy. The last half of the work addresses the question of old age. Tennyson's linkage of these two themes showed extraordinary foresight. He understood that modern society could both shatter tradition and create the possibility of something entirely new. Through him, and for the first time, we can see an elderhood that goes well beyond the pale shadow of an uncomplaining grandfather.

> . . . I will drink
> Life to the lees: All times I have enjoy'd
> Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those
> That loved me, and alone, . . .

This poem imagines and offers us something we could not have anticipated—an old age with its own claim on greatness, an elderhood kindled by the spark of a life lived. What, after all, could mere youth know of passions savored, of possibilities examined, explored, and now remembered? This is greatness founded on decades of experience with both joy and sorrow. This is the taste of life drunk to the lees.

> Little remains: but every hour is saved
> From that eternal silence, something more,
> A bringer of new things; and vile it were
> For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
> And this gray spirit yearning in desire
> To follow knowledge like a sinking star

It is the fact that the end of life is near that makes time so precious. "This gray spirit yearning in desire" links old age with its own pursuits. Here, at last, we savor knowledge and knowing without the adulterations that spring from youth. Tennyson celebrates a passion that only a dawning sense of mortality can awaken.

> Old age hath yet his honor and his toil;
> Death closes all: but something ere the end,

Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.

Old age makes its own demands on us, which should not be confused with the work of youth. This work may be noble and befitting "men that strove with Gods." Time takes much from us, but it also presents us with new paths to greatness.

. . . Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset . . .

This impulse to seek a newer world is part of a larger faith in progress and in human development. Tennyson asserts that such progress is not only possible but also essential in the last years of life. The evening of a life worth living reveals many things, few of which youth can know. There is much to learn beyond the sunset.

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

"That which we are, we are" is a perfect expression of the dualistic nature of elderhood. It is heroic in ways that Achilles (who craved glory but was ignorant of life's true depth) could never understand. An elderhood so full of passion must be yoked to new ends. It transcends the worn husk of adulthood and searches out new ways of knowing, being, and feeling. The goal may not be, should not be, to move heaven and earth. The struggle is to move the self. It is to plumb the depths of the old in search of the new.

Barkan's Definition

One hundred forty-four years after Tennyson published "Ulysses," Barry Barkan wrote "The Live Oak Definition of an Elder." I do not

know what inspired Tennyson to write his poem, but I do know how Barkan found his definition of an elder. Born in Brooklyn in 1942, Barkan was, at first, an unlikely candidate for sage of a new elderhood. He got his start as a journalist working the civil rights beat first for UPI and then for the Richmond, Virginia, *Afro-American* newspaper. He left the paper in the late 1960s to devote himself to "The Egg Cream Coliseum," a drug and alcohol rehabilitation program he created that was housed in a soda fountain shop. By 1972, Barkan had moved to Berkeley, taking with him a deep faith in two ideas: first, that people in need must be a vital part of any attempt to meet those needs, and second, that the creation of an intentional community is a powerful tool for the regeneration of the human spirit.

Fortune favored us all when Barkan brought these ideas to the world of aging. He committed himself to the work of restoring to the aged a meaningful role in our society and our communities. He foresaw that the people of his generation would, in the decades to come, form the largest and most influential group of elders the world has ever seen. In 1976, Barkan imagined that this age boom could be instrumental in creating regenerative communities on a vast scale. Such communities would serve all people, regardless of their age. One day, after a long sojourn in Live Oak Park, he composed "The Live Oak Definition of an Elder." The words remain fresh and insightful more than a quarter century after they were first written.

An elder is a person
Who is still growing,
Still a learner
Still with potential and
Whose life continues to have within it
Promise for and connection to the future.

Barkan begins by restoring elderhood to its rightful place in the human life cycle. Longevity, far from diminishing a person, gives forth its own promise and potential. He then confronts the declinist interpretation of aging. Elderhood creates a new potential for growth that must be declared and then protected. The last line uses the language of commencement. Because healthy beginnings always draw on the goodness of what came before, Barkan repeats the word *still*.

All that was, remains; still th
be known, more to be felt.

An elder is still in pursuit o
Joy and pleasure
And her or his birthright t
Remains intact.

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Barry Barkan has devoted his life to bringing this definition of an elder to life in the context of something he calls "regenerative community." An elder himself now, his definition rings with integrity just as it did the first time he formulated it under the spreading branches of a live oak tree.

Developmental Aging

Our attitudes about and approaches to longevity reflect a jumble of conflicting and overlapping ideas and beliefs. I wouldn't have it any other way. Old age is the time of life when similarly aged people are most different. Aging in modern society is not one thing; it is many things, many beliefs, many practices. Any single theory of aging is sure to be flawed because the phenomenon it seeks to describe is so diverse. That said, it seems possible to offer a unifying theme that allows us to examine critically the many different ways of understanding our longevity.

The concept of developmental aging allows us to see old age as part of the ongoing miracle of human development. It offers a perspective that connects all elements of the human life span from birth to death. The fetus becomes the newborn, the infant becomes the girl, the girl becomes the mother, the mother becomes the grandmother, the grandmother becomes the elder of her family and community. For tens of thousands of years, our mastery of age and aging has enabled the human species to reach beyond its grasp. Aging has propelled the development of the human being from the beginning.

Unexpected Insights

This sequence is being threatened now by an out-of-control adulthood's assault on childhood and elderhood. However, conditions for the overthrow of the cult of adulthood have never been more favorable. Each and every day we are cultivating the potential for the greatest generation of elders the world has ever known. Helping these

millions recognize the possibilities of life beyond adulthood will not be easy. Sadly, many will cling to adulthood for the rest of their lives. I believe many more will come to see themselves as elders and accept the crucial role that elderhood must play in a truly just society.

A society that cultivates the ability to bring a life worth living to the least among us enriches itself beyond measure. When we honor those who can do nothing for others, we enlarge a capacity for compassion that serves all people. A person who willingly sets aside the clatter of adulthood and enters deliberately and specifically into a life beyond adulthood becomes a beacon of hope to others.

It is relatively easy to imagine a growing cadre of socially engaged older people who are willing and able to dedicate time, money, and energy to leading positive social change in our society. The fog of declinism, however, makes it much more difficult to see how people who have been labeled "old" and "frail" could contribute to this effort. Any honest accounting of the potential influence of elders and elderhood must also address the contributions that people who are weak, ill, infirm, dependent, demented, disabled, and dying can make to this struggle.

The old and frail are able to surmount the dizzy bustle that clings to the young—to enter a time and place in which the spiritual and emotional dimensions of human life are wholly precedent over the humdrum workings (and failings) of organs, tissues, and systems. This is among the most admirable of all human endeavors. What the old and frail do is show us the way and provide us with greater insight into and a clearer perspective on the human condition.

I remember giving a speech about new perspectives in aging and long-term care in Anchorage, Alaska, one snowy January afternoon. I had worked my way through the ideas and projects I was engaged with at that time and, near the end of my presentation, made the observation that "Alzheimer's dementia is a tragedy." After I finished, I was approached by a young woman who wanted a word with me. She thanked me for my remarks and went on to say that among her people (she was a native Alaskan) dementia was viewed as a gift rather than a tragedy. This observation rocked me. She said that when an elder living with dementia made reference to seeing and speaking

with long-dead relatives, it was taken as proof that the elder had been gifted with the ability to have "one foot in this world and one foot in the spirit world."

As a physician, I had been accustomed to thinking of Alzheimer's dementia as a severe and ultimately fatal degenerative brain disease. This assumption can be shown to be accurate and even useful (for example, when searching for new drugs). It is not, however, the *only* way to see people living in this way. After I returned home from my trip, I began asking a question that was new to me. What if the people living with dementia were actually experiencing an unusual (and admittedly abnormal) form of development?

This line of thinking led me to see people living with dementia in new ways. What I had understood as a "progressive decline" in memory could also be defined as rapid rise in the power of forgetting. Older people, much more than the young, recognize that the ability to forget can bring us just as much happiness as remembering ever will. People living with dementia (who are supposed to have memory defects) actually soar over those of us who lack their power to forget. Perhaps not coincidentally, they also inhabit the state of BEING-doing much more comfortably than those who still treasure doing, getting, and having. It is possible to reinterpret the experience of living with dementia as an unusual form of accelerated development (something like the fifth-grade boy who is six feet tall) that propels people toward a state of being that few of us will ever live long enough to achieve on our own.

The point is not that people should aspire to a diagnosis of dementia; the normal course of aging is surely preferable to such a life. Instead, we should use this example as a reminder of how easy it is to dismiss the oldest of the old as having little or nothing to contribute to our understanding of life. The belief that a particular group is worthless and lacks a full measure of humanity has proven to be exceptionally dangerous in the past and could lead to tragedy in the future if we are not careful. In fact, rather than dismiss the oldest of the old, it is our duty to open ourselves to the diverse forms their wisdom takes.

Advocates of antiaging would likely shrug off my reinterpretation of dementia as being beside the point. After all, there is no need to bother with such questions when technology is close to rendering

Mitigated Aging	Antiaging	Developmental Aging
Old age brings mental and physical decline.	Old age is unnecessary.	Elderhood is difficult (but so is all of life).
The aged are entitled to high-quality medical and surgical treatment.	The young should resist old age with all means possible.	Elderhood is a vital and necessary part of the human life cycle.
The aged should lobby for access to resources.	Technology has or will have the means to conquer old age.	Elders need the highest possible level of health in order to develop properly.

On Being an Elder

Late-Life Developmental Tasks

The idea that elderhood should have developmental tasks would seem to contradict the very idea of an old age rich in *being*. In fact, *doing* is and must remain (until the last breath is drawn) an element of every human life. For adults, the idea of putting *being* first in daily life seems an unlikely route to gaining influence in the world. Some would argue that the measurable decline that accompanies aging obviously and permanently disqualifies the old from playing an important role in society. The book you hold in your hands disproves any such claims.

Although it was written by an adult, the elders who have touched my life inspired and guided this book's development and final form. From my great-grandmother Georgiana Williams to my grandparents, Durwood and Olive Saxon and William and Vivian Thomas, to my parents, William and Sandra Thomas, I have been molded, shaped, influenced, and educated by my elders. Even as an adult physician (and specialist in aging), my elder mentors Frank and Carter Williams, along with thousands of patients and their families, continue to lead me toward a deeper understanding of age and aging. The hands of an adult may have typed the words on these pages, but elders provided any and all of the truths they contain.

For as long as I remain an adult I will be ignorant of the lived experience offered to elders by their longevity. Despite this limita-

tion, my practice as a physician and an ingrained habit of observation lead me to ask: What does it mean to live as an elder? How can elderhood shape the future we all share? What are its most important functions? What does it offer us—young and old alike?

Decades from now, when I am at last prepared to lay down the work of adulthood, I will begin my own life as an elder. When that happens I hope to be prepared for the historic, *being*-rich responsibilities of making peace, giving wisdom, and creating a legacy.

Peacemaker

Human elders have long been known as peacemakers, and for good reason. The physical changes that accompany advancing age make conflict, armed and otherwise, worthless to the old. They simply cannot prevail against the young. While this transition can be painful on a personal level (and is usually painted as a form of failure), it serves society as a whole by preparing older people for life outside the adult hierarchy. Over time, the action-oriented strategies of DOING-being give way to the indirect and subtle influence of BEING-doing. Age may remove elders from power, but they remain a part of society. Longevity loosens the grip of the ego but also grants elders a new perspective on self and society. Together, these trends prepare elders for the singular role of peacemaker.

Tennyson, Tornstam, and Carstensen are right: the awareness of one's mortality that normally arises in late life—and so terrifies adults—opens new perspectives on the world in which elders live. Like statesmen serving their final terms in office, elders are freed from the tactical maneuvering that defines the struggle for adult rank and prestige. It is this freedom that allows them to put forth unique interpretations of the problems faced by their families and communities and to take on the role of peacemaker.

Elders' position outside the hierarchy is made secure by the changes age brings to the mind and body. Adults can accept elders as peacemakers because age ensures that elders will not use their new role to gain unfair advantage—elders simply cannot overpower the adults around them. (It is true that a small number of extraordinary

... other more

... functions—making peace, giving wisdom, creating a lega-

...—that only elders can fulfill.

Peacemaking is a delicate craft that can be mastered only through ...tice. Little in contemporary adulthood prepares one to become ...t, but even less attention is given to developing, learning, and ... the art of the peacemaker. Those who would accept this ...e willing to leave adulthood behind and enter into the ...uman elder.

...h the Self

... work in a nursing home one day when I was ... and physical examination of an elder recent... I sat down with the woman and ran ...ted to her diagnoses and medical histo... her family. Quite unexpectedly, her ... that her mother had died when ... people believed that a widower ... of young children and so, fol... younger brother were sent ... the burden, she was sent ... to another. ...

three-quarters of a century in the making. Even these limitations might have been overcome if this woman had believed that old age was a time for healing and making peace. Instead, she despaired of ever finding relief this side of the grave.

Inspired by Tennyson and Barkan, and working from a developmental approach to aging, I see now what I could not see then. I can imagine an alternative wherein this gentle soul could be received warmly as the newest member of an intentional community. Surely, the elders of such a community could have done much to bind up her wounds. Instead, she found herself confined to an institution, attended by an ill-prepared physician, with the means of her healing nearby but completely unavailable.

The difficult work of making peace with one's self can begin at any time and is an essential first step in the much longer journey toward becoming a peacemaker.

Making Peace in the Family

Every family is a civilization. It proclaims its achievements to the world, hides its secrets and shames, and struggles with the passage of time. My work as a physician has given me many opportunities to observe how families behave when they are confronted with the greatest calamity, the death of a loved one. Too often, their fumbling attempts at making peace in the moment of crisis fail because the effort is too little and has come too late. The prodigal daughter returns at the last moment but cannot receive her mother's forgiveness. She can only weep at the bedside, opening her heart but never knowing if she is being heard. A family, long splintered, worries together, all in the same room, for the first time in years. Old animosities are submerged, obscured, and sometimes surrendered in a last effort to "do what's right for Mom."

I am suggesting a vision of elderhood that does not delay peacemaking until this late date. It is the place of the elder to tend to the wounds of the family sooner rather than later. Where does the courage to take such action come from? Tennyson tells us:

> Old age hath yet his honor and his toil.
> Death closes all; but something ere the end,

Some work of noble note may yet be done, . . .

The courage to do the noble work of deliberately bringing peace to a family is, today, beyond all but a few exceptional elders. This will change, and in the not-too-distant future we will come to see skill at making peace as a normal part of late-life development, just as we now recognize mastery of letters and numbers as an ordinary step in early childhood development. In time, I expect to see fewer anguished deathbed reconciliations. As elders come to understand the nature of nonadult influence and the importance of their obligation to serve as peacemakers in their families, many wounded hearts will be cleansed, dressed, and healed. The good that comes of this healing will extend beyond those immediately involved, touching the members of every generation, even those yet to be born.

Making Peace in the World

We live in a world made by and for adults—a world wherein elders and elderhood are pushed to the margins of society. Mass society is, itself, the creation of adulthood and is compelled to serve the needs of adults. Not surprisingly, it has little use for the guiding hand of elderhood.

It is important to distinguish between a society guided by elders and a society governed by elders. The technical term for the latter is *gerontocracy*, and that form of government is particularly offensive to the modern individualistic sensibility. Gerontocracies have proven, throughout history, to be sclerotic, risk averse, and largely incapable of the kind of vibrant creativity essential to healthy human communities. Although it is known best for its military prowess, Sparta was first and foremost a gerontocracy. While Athenians clearly did not share the Spartans' special reverence for the aged, they did possess a freedom to think, to question, and to challenge the status quo that has echoed through the centuries.

The elder-guided society is and should be run by the vigorous adults of the time. Elders should intervene at critical points to ensure that the adults take into account perspectives that are too easily ignored by those gripped by the fever of rank and wealth. This form of cultural guidance has long proven its worth. The hilltop on which

I now live was, for thousands of years, considered to be part of the Iroquois Confederacy. Even today, the elder-guided form of governance is practiced in the longhouse of the Onondoga Nation. The voice of the elders is received with respect by the chiefs who administer the daily affairs of the nation.

Modern industrial society would be well served by the restoration of the elder's voice in public life. While the prototypical beauty pageant contestant espouses world peace, it is an old woman who has the experience, the voice, and the insights needed to pursue that lofty goal. The peace activists of the 1960s may now return to this work informed by a life lived—by experiences that, over the decades, have prepared them to do the real work of making peace.

Wisdom Giver

The Uses of Wisdom

Adulthood never stops whispering in our ears, never stops reminding us, "Doing is more important than being." Accustomed to valuing that which can be touched, or at least counted, we are often confused by the indistinct nature of being. We are taught not to rely on the pillars of emotion, affection, and love as the basis for understanding self and society. Society is especially eager to inflict these doubts on the aged. Few escape its ceaseless propaganda in favor of doing. The idea that being has virtues of its own is routinely undermined. The result is a stunted form of aging that subsists on the thin gruel of long-ago victories.

I remember visiting a retirement community in California in the late 1990s. I presented a lecture on the Eden Alternative to the leadership and then met privately with the organization's executive director. She was articulate and highly experienced. As our conversation progressed, she worked her way around to a frustration that she was reluctant to admit aloud. Every morning before she arrived at work, a handful of the men who lived in the complex lined up outside her office. Each man was eager to present a complaint or criticism relating to the physical plant or grounds, always making sure to emphasize his credentials while making his point. The issues were always

highly technical: "I was an engineer for John Deere for forty-five years, and I am telling you that the backup generator is too small for the demand; if there is ever a blackout, there'll be hell to pay." And so it went.

The source of her frustration, though she would not have put it this way, lay in the demand that these men were making that she readmit them to the society of adults. They yearned to be respected experts, restored to the technical problem-solving work of the adult.

As I came to know this woman better, I learned that she was facing a heavy burden of her own. Her adolescent daughter was struggling with a serious chronic disease. The girl's illness repeatedly plunged this woman into a whirlpool of grief and anger. On the flight home it occurred to me that the men of the retirement community and the executive director were like ships passing in the night. She had a crying need for the very life-wisdom that these men had spent decades acquiring. Despite this, she could see them only as nit-picking fault finders. The way she rolled her eyes when she talked about them revealed how deeply she resented their constant questioning of her abilities. For their part, they could have become wise men, the elders of this community. Instead, they chose to depend solely on the residual value of their increasingly outmoded stock of technical expertise. The desire to be recognized and respected as adults closed elderhood to them. Not surprisingly, they remained completely ignorant of this woman's grief. Meanwhile, she suffered the consequences of her failure to understand that she spent each workday in a building full of people who had struggled and overcome life challenges equal to or greater than what she was facing.

This dynamic is played out a million times over every day. Adults and elders alike confuse expertise and information with wisdom and stories. It would be better to live in a world that made appropriate use of each. The information glut has all too often drowned out the stories we need. In the life of a healthy community, stories actually matter more than information. They are also far more durable. Stories are told only when they can be heard, heard only when they are told. They come to life in the moment of their telling and then make a place in our memories. Contrast this with the daily table of

stock price quotations. Those who prepare them care little about how they are used. They know that the next day's prices will make that day's information instantly obsolete, forgettable, and forgotten.

Mechanical Stories

Everyone knows that elders like and use stories. Storytelling is one of the pleasures of life, its sweetness enhanced when the story is used to transmit a bit of wisdom. Muriel Rukeyser once wrote that "the universe is made of stories, not of atoms." I would like to add a corollary: "Stories make the best wrapping for any gift of wisdom." When a thought is easily translatable into a story, it probably holds a good bit of wisdom. Technical information, useful as it is, has little or no wisdom in it. This is why computer-programming manuals are never made into feature films.

Elders' stories can be imbued with great value because the stories emerge from a life and a nature that give precedence to being. A lifetime in the making, the wisdom of elders is a subtle thing, too easily overlooked. We may be witnessing a worldwide triumph of longevity, but our society is dangerously ill prepared to receive the bounty of stories that our elders have to offer. Increasingly, our society resembles a country that has built the world's best libraries but whose citizens cannot read.

This is not to say that we are without stories of any kind. In place of the ordinary stories of the everyday, of people who will vanish from human memory if their lives are not recalled for us, we have raised up a vast mechanized storytelling industry. This entertainment business specializes in action, adventure, romance, drama, and comedy, all acted out by people we do not know and can never know. Like brightly colored cotton candy, these confections are tasty but offer little or no nutrition. The cult of adulthood has aggressively mechanized the telling of stories, confusing technical sophistication with wisdom and making an industry of the finest human art. What we need is the real life wisdom of the elders in our lives. Listening to and reflecting on their stories can bring us insights that the dramatic exploits of action heroes can never hope to inspire. Best of all, no special-effects budget is needed.

Stories that remind us to be kind to one another, stories that tell us to be wary of strangers, stories that prod us to welcome strangers, stories that reveal dimensions of good and evil—these are the instruments of a culture, not the culture itself. For millennia, elders have been the repositories of their people's lore. They have stored our most cherished beliefs and then transmitted them to the young. The legacy of the elder by the fire recounting tales to a circle of children has a powerful pull on us and, indeed, is a function of elderhood that has been endangered by the vast and growing entertainment industry.

We are, in these days, much more likely to get our stories from corporate conglomerates and much less likely to get them from people we know, people who have lived life long and well. This must change. The rebirth of elderhood must include the concept of elders telling and others receiving the wisdom that only stories can hold. Why do I say this? Because, at the very least, making this reconstructed elderhood available to the old men of the retirement community that I mentioned above would allow them to finally let go of their obsession with pipes, conduits, and fittings and, hopefully, reach for something larger, better, and vastly more important. Storytelling could help them become the elders they were meant to be.

The wisdom of elders is most available to those who are willing to acknowledge that they no longer possess (or need to possess) "that strength which in old days moved earth and heaven." It comes to those whose longevity has taught them to embrace being "made weak by time and fate." The elders among us are meant "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." What is little recognized in our time is that, for elders, striving need not be yoked to doing, getting, and having. An elderhood that understood its own story would be well suited to passing on just the right bit of wisdom to a grieving mother. It would be delivered, as wisdom always is, in the form of a story told by one person to another.

Legacy Creator

I grew up in a small town on the New York banks of the Susquehanna River. My family had been part of the community since the late

1700s. In fact, one of my great-great-grandfathers is listed as the first recorded death in the town. For better and worse, everyone knew everyone else; it could hardly be otherwise. As an adolescent, I had very mixed feelings about being so well known. One day I decided to hitchhike to a nearby town to see my girlfriend, despite the fact that I had been forbidden to do so. I stuck out my thumb and soon was on my way to her house. After a pleasant visit, I returned home. Whistling innocently as I entered the house, I was immediately informed that I was grounded. Someone had seen me hitchhiking and had called my parents to tell them what I was up to. The small-town grapevine is fast and efficient, with a bandwidth that puts the Internet to shame.

As a boy living in a small town, I had little use for being so well known that passersby would not only recognize me but also know my family and know what kind of conduct my parents expected of me. I lived with the knowledge that my neighbors felt perfectly comfortable calling my parents and telling them that I was, at that very minute, violating their expectations of me. For elders, though, the issue cuts in an entirely different direction.

Old age is increasingly being defined in terms of the dangers of being *unknown*. Instead of living in the warm embrace of others, the aged increasingly occupy a twilight zone outside the whirl inspired by the cult of adulthood. The dangers of being unknown were brought home to me when Nancy Fox, the executive director of the Eden Alternative, wrote to me about an experience she had while on vacation in Florida:

> The problems of aging and long-term care seemed a million miles away on this beautiful island, but I should have known better. Friday morning I was walking down to the beach when I came upon an older man, standing beside the road. As I got closer I could see that something was wrong. He was trembling with fear as he summoned me closer. I had to lean close to hear, as his voice was barely above a whisper. He told me that his wife had fallen and that he could not help her up. I told him that I could help and he led me slowly back to his house.
>
> I could hear her moaning even before we entered the house. We found her on the floor in the kitchen. Even slighter in build than her

husband, she was lying on her side on the hard linoleum floor. Her light, cotton housecoat barely covered her thin legs. The breakfast dishes, still unwashed, sat on the counter above her. And she was in pain. I had to step over her to reach the phone. I called 911. As the phone rang, I asked the man his address. His wife responded, "218 Oakwood Lane." I asked his name and she responded, between cries of pain, "Hammond with an H. Katharine and Henry." I asked her if there was a daughter or son I could call. Katharine said, "None." Any family? "None." Anyone I could call—a neighbor, a friend, clergy, anyone? "There is no one," Katharine answered.

She began to cry. Although her hip was surely broken, there was much greater pain in her heart. She knew only too well that the life she had known was over. These would likely be their last moments together as a couple in their own home.

Her grief moved me to tears.

Contrast Katharine's confession that "there is no one" with my friend Bernard Mambo's belief that "the death of an old person is like the loss of a library." We live in a time and place that allows older people to disappear from view and then leave this life without being known by others. Every human life has or should have a legacy. William Tyndale called this the "message wherefore I am sent into the world." Barry Barkan, five hundred years later, declared that an elder is a person:

. . . whose work it is
To synthesize wisdom from long life experience and
Formulate this into a legacy
For future generations.

The final task of elderhood is the creation of a legacy that can serve others and, later, be handed down to those who have yet to be born. This work is easily accomplished in a settled traditional community and terribly difficult in a highly mobile industrial society.

I grew to maturity knowing not only my own elders but also the elders of the community: Burtis Everett, the town historian, who worked for years as a railroad stationmaster—he and his wife, Laura, were devoted to the Methodist church. Jack Klausner never married but loved children—he sat on the steps of the post office and hand-

ed out Tootsie Rolls to the children who came by. Louise Barton knew my parents well and, when my father was out of work, saved our home by paying the taxes on our property. Marjorie Lee taught school and made quilts, which she gave away to her neighbors. I mention them now not only to honor their memory but also as proof that these men and women were able to live and die as well-known members of the community.

Their legacies were handed down informally in the casual manner of the everyday. Living as we do now, we will need to be much more explicit and methodical in our effort to capture and then share the legacies of our elders. The legacies that I have in mind are part life story, part simple biography, and part gift—in the form of a poem, a drawing, a letter, or a piece of hard-won wisdom. Taken together, these elements can become much more than the sum of their parts. The creation of such a legacy requires a cooperative journey of discovery to capture the essence of a life lived. Ideally, this life review process should take place in partnership with members of several generations. A grandfather may wish to gather up his mother's legacy and encourage his grandson to be part of the process. Members of a faith community may create their own intergenerational teams and prepare them to capture the legacies of older members of the congregation. As our understanding of elderhood and its rightful place in our society grows, the creation and sharing of legacy will come to be seen as an essential part of late life. This is more than an idle wish. Our society needs these legacies and, day by day, grows less and less able to gain access to them. We need them because they can—

- foster gerotranscendence by encouraging the rethinking of an elder's life,
- fulfill our duty to honor elders by creating opportunities for elders to give as well as receive,
- create and strengthen the intergenerational bonds of affection on which every healthy human community depends,
- answer important questions about our own lives and locate our own experiences within the vast terrain of human experience, and

- serve as an ongoing reminder of the value and importance of elderhood, when rightly understood.

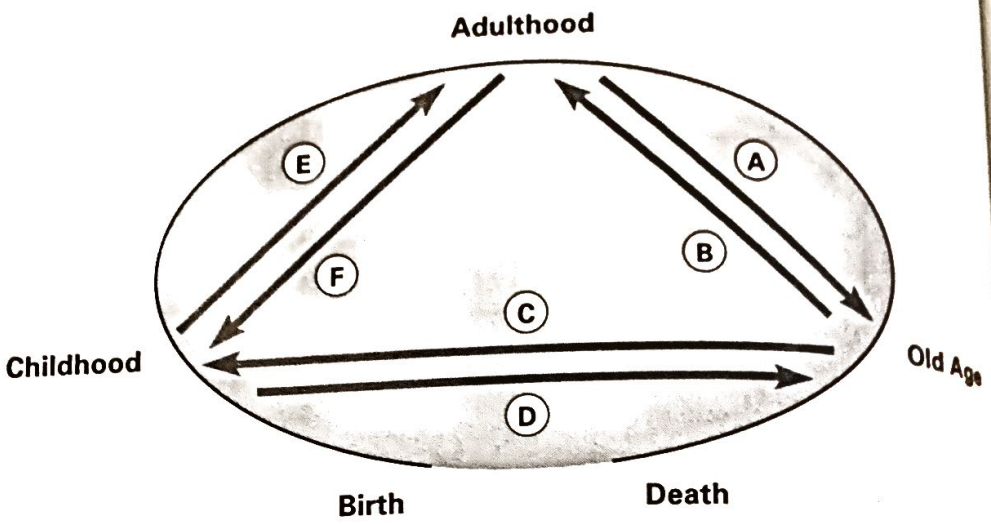
Although this idea would have seemed stranger than any science fiction to the elders I knew as a child, life in the twenty-first century requires us to make smart use of information technology that can help us record, store, and share the legacies of our elders. Many Web sites have begun to document the legacies of elders. Some give advice to those who would join with elders in the work of creating legacies. In the years to come, the library of online legacies will grow to include the stories of millions of lives. The ability to search this archive will allow users to locate legacies that are likely to touch on the challenges in their own lives. Imagine a young couple faced with the heartbreak of a seriously ill child. Searching among the legacies of elders, these parents might be able to find the wisdom that only long decades of reflection on a life lived can provide. This is something neither the expert counsel of a credentialed professional nor the real-time empathy that a support group of peers offers. It provides access to that most authentically human of all possessions: knowledge of the "message wherefore I am sent into the world."

Eldertopia

Old Age in a New World

Throughout this book I have argued that our longevity is both ancient and a vital contemporary presence. We are headed into the most elder-rich era of human existence and should be celebrating our good fortune at every turn. Instead, we are in danger of squandering this historic windfall. Human elderhood was created, protected, sustained, and nurtured because it serves vital human interests. It can continue to do so if we understand it properly and provide for its continued development.

The cult of adulthood promotes the misconception that old age is an appendage to both human life and human society. The cult bemoans the vast expense associated with our growing longevity but also congratulates itself on its marvelous generosity toward the survivors. Our popular culture offers little or nothing that can lead us toward a deep understanding of elders and elderhood. Instead, we are tutored, day and night, in the virtues of youthful vigor. Advocates who currently lobby for the aged work toward a society in which the aged are given protection and respect equal to that accorded to the young. They forget that the virtue of elderhood lies in how stunningly different from either childhood or adulthood it is. Those who would dismiss elderhood might as well also surrender fire-making and the wheel. Our longevity is a gift greater than either of these; it is the invention that made all inventions possible.



A Support adults provide to elders

B Assistance elders give to adults

C Gentling and acculturation of children by elders

D Assistance and affection given to elders by children

E Participation in work of adults by children

F Food, shelter, clothing, and affection provided to children by adults

The cycle of cultural evolution

The diagram reminds us that the relationships that have powered human cultural advancement for tens of thousands of years are a complex set of intergenerational interactions. Taken together, they form the engine that has shaped us, served us, blunted our worst tendencies, and magnified our best. Given the terrible might of modern industrial society, we need this engine more than ever before. The cult of adulthood is insistent in its claims that old age is irrelevant and possibly on the edge of its own extinction (given sufficient progress in pharmaceutical laboratories). Though few actually believe that old age can be vanquished, it is easy to wish that it were so. Many find refuge in treasured illusions about traditional aging. In truth, the old way of growing old was never as good as we like to remember it being and is especially ill suited to the society in which we live today. We really have no choice but to look ahead. The times demand that we create a new elderhood—one that fits the way we live now. We need this new

elderhood not only for ourselves (we all deserve a better, richer, more meaningful old age) but for people of all ages.

Public discourse, however, operates from very different assumptions. Within its realm, longevity is imagined to be of concern solely to the aged, those who care for them, and those who pay for that care. We are constantly reminded of how expensive this is, and like the miser who feels he may have been cheated, we expect a precise accounting of what has been paid and what has been delivered. Former Colorado governor Richard Lamm begins his essay "The Moral Imperative of Limiting Elderly Health Entitlements" by noting that "one of the great challenges in America's future is to retire the baby boomers without bankrupting the country or unduly burdening future generations . . . Age could well be as divisive in the next forty years as race and sex have been for the last forty years."

Given the sums involved and the potentially devastating consequences of mismanagement, much of this concern is warranted. What is missing from the debate, however, is a proper accounting of what elderhood can contribute to society. This side of the ledger is given scant attention by those who can see only the wealth and vigor of adults and the potentially ruinous burden imposed by the aged. Lamm goes on to point out that, regardless of how it may make us feel, decisions will have to be made: "We are a compassionate society and can afford a lot, but we cannot afford everything. No publicly financed health system can ignore the law of diminishing returns . . . It is necessary to find, among the myriad of things we can do, what practically in a budget we ought to do."

The worldview that former governor Lamm represents places old age outside the pale of productive, contributing adults. They are expensive accessories and, while we may be a "compassionate society," there is a limit to what *we* can do for *them*. I am arguing for a very different conception of elders and elderhood—one that places them (and their needs) within rather than outside the central purposes of our society. What we need is a holistic perspective that appreciates and respects the contributions that people of all ages have made and are now making to the pursuit of happiness and our collective well-being. It should not come as a surprise that our language

lacks a word that describes the interdependence that joins young and old. Instead, we have "entitlements" and "cross-generational wealth transfers." The wisdom of living in a multigenerational social structure is ancient, undeniable, and deserving of a word of its own. I like *Eldertopia:*

> **Eldertopia** *noun* A community that improves the quality of life for people of all ages by strengthening and improving the means by which (1) the community protects, sustains, and nurtures its elders, and (2) the elders contribute to the well-being and foresight of the community. An Eldertopia that is blessed with a large number of older people is acknowledged to be "elder-rich" and uses this human capital to the advantage of all.

Earlier in this book, in the chapter "The Way We Live Now," I presented a map of life that I think can help us make sense of life as it is lived in modern industrial societies. An understanding of the role BEING-doing plays in childhood and elderhood, and the virtues that DOING-being brings to adulthood can help us find our place within the lives we are living today and might well be living in the future. Such a map can be helpful as we explore longevity; it very usefully highlights the danger of confusing our longevity with the perpetuation of youth. Eldertopia goes even further by showing us why we live so long. Our longevity exists, has meaning, and creates value because it provides human beings with a mechanism for improving the lives of people *of all ages*. That mechanism is a pattern of reciprocal relationships that unite the generations. Far from being society's expensive leftovers, elders and the elderhood they inhabit are crucial to the well-being of all.

This assessment highlights the flaws inherent in the accounting systems of the "old-age welfare state." Conventional practice tabulates to the penny the money spent serving the elderly, even as it ignores the vital contributions that our longevity makes to society as a whole. We need a new and much more realistic set of accounting books.

Fortunately, Eldertopia can lead us to a deeper and far more accurate understanding of how longevity completes us. For a start it can shed light on the complex and easily overlooked intergenera-

tional transfers that are essential to people of all ages. The idea of the "greedy geezer" is the product of a society that counts only what the young pay to the old. Becoming more conscious of the contributions that elders make to the young is a good first step in correcting the bias against the old. Fully developed, this more balanced approach can document in black and white why our longevity is a solid investment.

Mapping Eldertopia

Eldertopia supposes that human communities rely heavily on reciprocal altruism and calls for a detailed accounting of all sides of these exchanges. In its most basic form, such a chart of accounts would include answers to the following questions:

- In what ways and to what extent do elders receive support from adults?
- In what ways do elders contribute ongoing assistance to the adults of the community?
- How are we to recognize and properly value the gentling and acculturation of children by elders?
- In what ways and to what extent do we acknowledge the ongoing assistance and affection given to elders by the children in their lives?

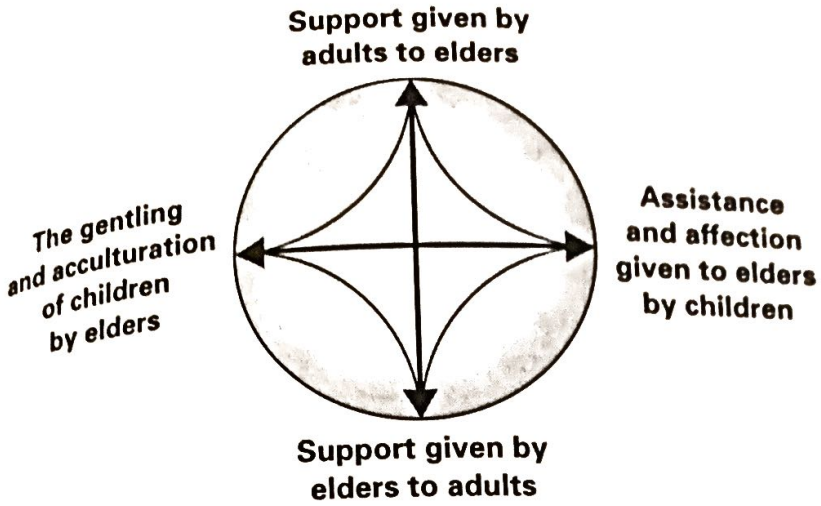
Some of these contributions can be reduced to numerical terms; others cannot. The current public debate surrounding aging and its entitlements is distorted by the nearly exclusive emphasis that is placed on the financial cost of publicly funded programs and the pitiful lack of attention that is paid to the more qualitative elements of the ongoing exchange between young and old.

It is easy to obtain figures on the cost of government programs that support the aged. We know exactly what our society spends to finance worthy programs such as Medicare, Meals on Wheels, Aging Resource Centers, home health care, transportation, prescription drugs, Area Agencies on Aging, and Adult Protective Services. Much more valuable, however, than all these programs and much harder to

reduce to fiscal terms is the support that family and friends offer to older relatives and neighbors. What is the value of an attentive and loving daughter-in-law? What value should society place on all those trips to the doctor, the shopping, the meals prepared, the checkbooks balanced not for money but for love? In fact, we do not know and perhaps will never know the answer to such questions. What we should acknowledge is that these contributions dwarf the expenditures made by publicly financed programs. The sum of our investment in old age (public and private) is said to be large and growing, but it is already much larger than we suppose, and it is growing faster than we think.

In order for any exchange to be fair and just, both parties must fully understand the value of what is being given and received. Alarmist rhetoric of the "plague of locusts" variety becomes shrill precisely because it fails to acknowledge the value of what elders have done, do now, and will continue to contribute to the young. Public officials and academic experts have surprisingly little to say on the subject of how the aged help sustain their families and communities. Studies of volunteerism have lauded the work that senescents and elders do within faith-based and community organizations, and a few studies have even attempted to put a price tag on those contributions. Far greater, though, is the commitment that the aged make to the people they love. Most people suppose that adults support their aged parents with material resources (and many do), but taken as a whole, the elders of our society give more to their children and their children's families than they receive from them.

Perhaps the most endangered and least appreciated element of the ancient exchange between young and old is the gentling and acculturation of children by elders. Historically, this has taken place exclusively within the family and kinship group. Life in modern society has, of course, disrupted many of these arrangements. Children are increasingly confined to and molded by large, professionally run educational institutions. Elders are segregated, by choice and by fiat, within their own age-specific institutions, facilities, and housing developments. The result is a generation of young unlike any before it, a generation that is growing to maturity without the guiding hand



The four dimensions of Eldertopia

of elders and elderhood. This arrangement penalizes elders as well. Many must live and die without knowing the tender embrace of the very young in their daily lives.

A full accounting of these exchanges, even one that lacked precise values, would alter public policy and reshape public opinion. The material aspect of such an exchange—goods and services—is the easiest to document and can usually be tallied in dollars and cents. But we must also make the informal and private dimensions of the exchange known, and give them their due. Eldertopia is, at its most fundamental level, a path to a new consciousness of age and aging. It sets aside incomplete ideas about dependency and decline and presents instead the dynamic image of an active and ongoing exchange between the generations. Taken seriously, it can help us document the staggering value contained within the global age boom. It can change how we live together. Consider the following Eldertopian possibilities.

Elders Giving Warmth Elders have always made important contributions to the young of their families and communities. For thousands of years, relationships created between young and old have made life better for both groups. In Eldertopia, all school construction and remodeling projects would include housing and community services for elders. The idea of isolating one group from the other

would be seen as the ridiculous waste that it is. Those who sought to provide care and services for the elders would take care to integrate their offerings with the routines and needs of the young. In Eldertopia the wall that separates young and old would have to come down.

Elders Receiving Warmth The myth of independence has led millions of elders to prefer living alone to any form of communal life. This is in spite of the fact that old age, like childbirth, was never meant to be confronted alone. The Meals on Wheels program is intended to improve life for elders living at home by delivering meals to their homes. Because of the expense involved, some programs have turned to weekly deliveries of frozen food instead of daily deliveries of hot meals. Of course, the daily delivery of meals offers much more than food. It also provides what one elder calls "a face at the door." In the future, daily meal deliveries will be difficult to sustain unless there is a community-wide awareness of the value of bringing human warmth into elders' lives. In Eldertopia, community leaders would acknowledge that elders cannot live on frozen food alone.

Elders Giving Wisdom Many traditional societies maintain mechanisms whereby the wisdom of elders can be communicated to the leaders of the day. Elder councils, for example, provide a balancing perspective that considers the long-term consequences of any proposed action. Too often in our society, the perspective of elderhood is reduced to just one of many competing interest groups. Eldertopia encourages the formation of elder councils that meet regularly and offer their views on the challenges and opportunities facing the community. The topics addressed might well include matters that the conventional political system would rather sweep under the rug. The media can and should cover the elder council and its deliberations. In Eldertopia, the community as a whole would no longer be deaf to the voices of it elders.

Elders Receiving the Benefits of Technology Advances in technology have done much to improve the well-being of older people, but so much more could be done. There is a tremendous potential for using ordinary off-the-shelf technology to help elders do more themselves,

expand their potential to live independently and in dignity, and maintain vital connections to their community and people they love. We can and should embrace a smart technology that fuses an accurate understanding of the challenges of old age with the best tools that our industrial society has to offer. Eldertopia would ensure that the elders had access to technology capable of aiding the pursuit of the best elderhood possible.

Elderhood's Commitment to Stewardship Elders have long been critical of the adult's desire to get, have, and take all that he or she is capable of getting, having, and taking. The consequences of such avarice can be found in our dirty air and water and the mass extinction of species that is currently in progress. Elders have long spoken for Earth, its living creatures, and the children who are yet to be born. They have not always prevailed, nor should they, but a society that marginalizes elders and the value of their lived experience endangers us all because it removes their concerns from our thoughts. There is much to be done if we are to repair the damage that has been done to the living world that sustains us. Eldertopia would have an Elder Environmental Conservation Corps that would tackle projects that would strengthen the health and vitality of the natural world. In Eldertopia, nature would have an influential new ally.

Elders Receiving Well-Being from Nature There is a dawning awareness that nature should be an important part of any setting intended to improve health or assist in healing. Eventually, the inclusion of nature in plans for these environments will seem as essential and ordinary as planning for doors and windows. In Eldertopia, the community would organize itself to see that the healing effect that comes with a connection to nature is made available to every elder.

Eldertopia is a useful concept because we can use it to improve the well-being of all members of society. It makes explicit the ancient patterns of exchange between the young and the old. We all benefit when these connections are strengthened and enriched, just as we all suffer when they are ignored or trampled. The most elder-rich period of human history is upon us. How we regard and make use of

this windfall of elders will define the world in which we live. When the woodcutter returned his father to the family table, he made life better not just for his father but for the whole family. Eldertopia restores aging to longevity and returns the aged to a worthy elderhood. Even more than that, it restores elderhood to its rightful place in the human life cycle. In this way, it creates the possibility of a better life for us all.

New Directions

The word *Eldertopia* is tinged with impossibility. Sophisticated adults, after all, feel that they have outgrown utopias—left them behind on their journey into the future. We should not be so hasty. The utopian ideal has long served to reveal the gap between what is and what ought to be. At its best, it is distilled imagination placed into the service of everyday life. Utopias have the power to change how we think about our times and our selves. Eldertopia is notable because it offers not the violent disruption of revolution but a patient, gentle return to an evolutionary process that began long ago and that is already deep in our bones. Because it is founded on millennia of human experience, Eldertopia requires neither federal legislation nor a court order in order to come to life. In fact, we can begin creating Eldertopia today.

Marcel Proust observed, "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes." This is the challenge of Eldertopia. How can we convert ordinary situations and daily decisions into extraordinary opportunities to explore a new way of seeing, thinking, and acting? How do we bring the complex web of interdependencies that define a healthy community out into the open? How can we cope with the grinding efficiency of the cult of adulthood, which is, increasingly, putting the true nature of our longevity beyond our reach?

This alienation is not inevitable. Not a day, not a moment passes when we do not have the opportunity to move our society toward the ideals of Eldertopia. The importance of this idea grows with the gathering power of adulthood and the distortions that come of living

in a world run by and for adults. There is a limit to how long we can continue to discount and dismiss the guiding intelligence of elders and elderhood. How does society acknowledge the bilateral nature of the community's relationship with its elders? How do our decisions and priorities enlarge or diminish our ability to sustain this exchange? Does the item you are hearing about at a meeting, reading about in the newspaper, or discussing within your family aid in the rebirth of elderhood, or does it simply extend the power of adults and adulthood?

Consider the following situations according to how well or poorly they bring forth the possibility of Eldertopia:

- A local nursing home is requesting approval for an addition to its existing facility. This move simply strengthens the grip that the old-age archipelago has over the aged and offers the community little or nothing in return. **Rating: Poor**
- A local senior center announces that it is hosting a "brown bag" evaluation of local elders' prescribed medication regimens. A licensed pharmacist tours local communities, helping elders avoid the perils of polypharmacy and drug interactions. The elders who attend save money by eliminating unnecessary medications and reduce their exposure to unpleasant medication side effects. **Rating: Good**
- A coalition of organizations serving the young and the old creates a summer camp that accommodates and integrates the needs of older people (including people currently confined to nursing homes) and local children. Such an intergenerational summer camp strengthens the community by enriching the bond between young and old. **Rating: Excellent**

Does the change actively recognize that elders are a vital resource in the community and that the community is, in fact, elder-rich? How is that richness integrated into innovation?

- Nursing homes lobby for increased funding for the services they provide, and the dollars needed to fund the increase are taken from programs that provide home- and community-

based services. This outcome reflects the political strength of an industry rather than the preferences of community elders. It fails us because it slows the move away from institutional long-term care. **Rating: Poor**

- A local school initiates a program that connects elders with latchkey children. A participating elder makes regular daily phone contact with a child and provides a reliable source of interest and concern. This reduces loneliness among both groups and teaches children about the meaning and worth of elderhood. **Rating: Good**
- A newspaper article announces the creation of a local chapter of the Elder Environmental Conservation Corps. The Corps recruits members and organizes projects with a special emphasis on bringing young and old together. The Corps also reaches out to those who have been removed from the community by taking an active role in the "greening" of local long-term care environments. This work provides visible proof of the value of stewardship and creates opportunities for the young to share the company of the old. **Rating: Excellent**

To what degree does the project or service demonstrate a commitment to improving the quality of life for people of all ages? Healthy communities rely heavily on the virtues of reciprocal altruism; we can guide social change by favoring innovations that foster reciprocity and by discouraging changes that rely solely on the movement of material resources from one group to another.

- A local agency seeks funding to extend its Meals on Wheels service area. It supports its request by emphasizing the number of people who will be served and the number of meals that will be prepared and delivered. **Rating: Poor**
- The request is revised. This time the funding is justified both in terms of the number of people served and a promised increase in participation by volunteers of all ages. The desired outcome is evaluated in terms of a combined measure of service delivered and growth of the volunteer effort. **Rating: Good**

- Another revision is submitted. This time the envisioned outcomes include the number of meals delivered, diversity in the age and background of volunteers, the variety of efforts contributed, and the impact of an outreach effort to communicate Eldertopian ideas to elders, volunteers, and community members in the new service area. **Rating: Excellent**

The need for human warmth touches people of all ages. Eldertopia is dedicated to creating human warmth for young and old alike. In fact, it leverages the ancient virtues that have held the generations together for millennia. In our families, in our jobs, in our thoughts and conversations, we can dedicate ourselves to the creation of a community with greater warmth for everyone. Human warmth is associated with optimism, trust, and generosity. How does what we do create or destroy human warmth?

- The local Area Agency on Aging announces the creation of a geriatric case management system for frail elders living in the community. This worthy goal is presented solely in terms of cost control and the arm's-length delivery of professional services. **Rating: Poor**
- A group of community and faith-based organizations begins to teach its members how to advocate for people they care about. This unites young and old and enables people to demonstrate their commitment to the elders in their lives in an effective new way. **Rating: Good**
- A United Way agency announces its intention to evaluate all requests for funding in terms of the precepts of Eldertopia. This does not mean that it will fund only "services for the elderly." In fact, it is just the opposite. The United Way will back efforts that can demonstrate how they intend to improve the quality of life for people of all ages by strengthening and improving the means by which (1) the community protects, sustains, and nurtures its elders and (2) the elders contribute to the well-being and foresight of the community.

Rating: Excellent

How can our mastery of tools and technologies be used in support of elders and elderhood? Smart technology acknowledges the human dimension of the tools we use and is conscious of how those tools shape the communities in which we live.

- A local senior center installs Internet-ready computers for use by the elderly. **Rating: Poor**
- The school district arranges for elders to use the school's equipment and staff for computer technology education. **Rating: Good**
- Senior centers match children with elders so that each can teach the other about computers and the uses of the Internet. Simultaneously, elders are encouraged to go to schools to learn and share computer skills. Children and elders act as both teachers and students as time and circumstances dictate. Eldertopia cultivates a growing awareness of the bilateral nature of the exchange between generations—each gives, each receives. The key variable is enlarging the bilateral exchange of skills and abilities. The temptation to pigeonhole either group according to stereotyped attitudes is resisted. **Rating: Excellent**

In what ways does society acknowledge the importance of nature and contact with the living world?

- A nursing home establishes a pet visitation program. While it is better than doing nothing, this type of intervention medicalizes the joys we associate with the human-animal bond. **Rating: Poor**
- Local gardening clubs (whose members are mostly older) actively recruit school children into their ranks. **Rating: Good**
- Your local Elder Environmental Conservation Corps announces its first meeting. You and your grandchildren decide to attend and mark the date on your calendars. **Rating: Excellent**

One of the advantages of a concept like Eldertopia is that it weaves a concern for our elders together with the interests and desires

of people of all ages. In the context of Eldertopia, groups that support children, refugees, women, education, entrepreneurship, and ecology can all find reasons to be enthused about bringing elders into their own work.

This idea of bringing elders into the work of various groups provides a powerful opportunity to spread the concept of Eldertopia and leverage the power of social change across a wide range of community agencies and organizations. A similar strategy was employed with respect to public art in the city of San Francisco. In the 1990s, a small group of people were intent on seeing a wider array of art become available to the public outside of museums. Though their funds were limited, they saw value in sharing their ideals with many other stakeholders, including architects, developers, neighborhood associations, and community groups. The result is that many of these other entities included public art in their own projects and initiatives. The impact ultimately went far beyond anything they could have done on their own.

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I have devoted these last pages to practicalities because the consciousness of elderhood that I have been arguing for matters little unless we also challenge the cult of adulthood and its campaigns against both youth and old age. We are not prisoners of this social order; we can confront its beliefs. We can rethink the approach we are taking toward our own longevity. A life centered on BEING-doing, once embraced, can be made very sweet indeed. We can begin to look at the older people we know not as potential burdens but as elders in the making. Political debate can be steered away from the looming war between young and old, fit and frail, and toward policies that are dedicated to the good of people of all ages and abilities.

The ideas of Eldertopia show how our commitment to the elders of our community can lead us to better ways of living together. Eldertopia rejects the zero-sum game of interest-group politics and embraces instead a fount of human wisdom fifty thousand years in the making. It is true that we are living in a time of crisis, and it is also true that this crisis carries with it the seeds of our personal, social, and

cultural renewal. We are living in a historic mo
make now can either ensure or destroy the p
longevity and the elderhood of those yet to be
What we need most of all, what we mus
truth of our human heritage. Old age is
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the source of all our answers from
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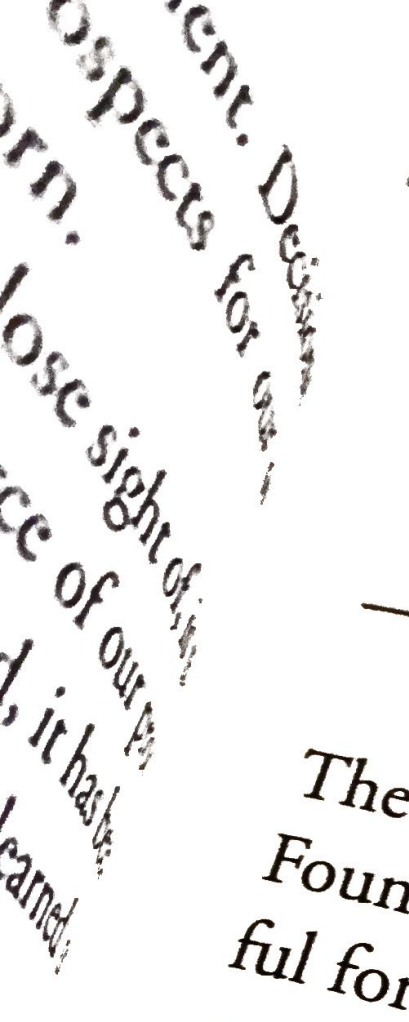

Acknowledgmen

The generous support provided by the Ro
Foundation (RWJF) made this work possible. I
ful for the opportunity the foundation gave me.
own right, David Colby saw what few others co
ed for these ideas early in their development. A
program officer, he guided the project from the
tionship with the RWJF deepened with time, and
ate the comments and insights of Jim Knickma
especially their feedback on the Green House
Mississippi.

Dr. Mary Jane Koren has been my guardi
decade, first in her role at
lth and later