

Being Old in America

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A recent book on being old in America asks as its title, *Why Survive?* A headline in *U.S. News and World Report* reads "Life for the Elderly in 1975 -- Many are Hungry and Afraid." Unfortunately that portrayal is all too accurate.

A couple of years ago, the San Francisco Unification Church gave a Christmas Eve dinner and party for the elderly -- many would not come even though transportation was provided from a central place. They just don't go out at night, at all. It's not too surprising.

America's elderly are the victims of crime far out of proportion to their percentage (one-tenth) of the population. For the most part, the elderly live in small rooms in high crime and marginal neighborhoods of big cities, where they are more susceptible to attacks such as the one in Washington, D. C. in which an 82-year old widow died several days after being beaten and raped in her apartment. But they must live in these neighborhoods because that's where the rents are lowest. Nearly one in six people over 65 lives in poverty, compared with one in ten people under the age of 65.

Tired of life, many elderly people spend their last years looking out of windows at life going on around them. In the middle of the day they sit on park benches and kibitz. Perhaps they gather at a senior center to play checkers for a couple of hours or do crafts. If they're lucky, they live near one of the growing number of agencies which provide one hot meal a day for the elderly at low cost or free of charge, to help them "get by." Little things become burdensome. When they get on the bus, will the driver start off lurchily before they get to a seat? Living alone, as so many do, who would know or help if they got sick or hurt?

"Money alone won't help.

It's a social and economic problem, but it's also a psychological problem. They are so alone and so isolated, and there are so many who are just dying because they have no hope," says Mrs. Lillian McCall, director of San Francisco's Commission on Aging, in the *U.S. News* article.

The "little old lady in tennis shoes," famous for promoting offbeat causes, has taken to campaigning for her own rights. The buttons read "Senior Power." Groups such as the Grey Panthers, the American Association of Retired People and the National Council of Senior Citizens are committed to eliminating injustices toward older people through increased aware lcss and political action. They demand better medical aid programs, increased Social Security benefits, job opportunities and an end to mandatory retirement. But changing the laws is not the whole answer.

The problem of old people in our society comes down to a problem with family life in America. A friend from India told me, in India, once you finish your education and get a job, you are expected to support your parents for the rest of their lives. The Confucian tradition which prevails throughout much of the Far

East reveres the elderly and the unity of the family.

Why then, in America, do we find millions of elderly Americans living alone? Mrs. Polly Francis, 91, recently wrote in a Washington Post article, "Our greatest need is not met. It is one that we never outgrow: It is the need to feel cherished by someone -- to know that there is a place where we 'belong.' This is something that no retirement home, nursing home or hospital can provide."

Instead of being cherished, we find old people being literally dumped by their relatives. "Abandoned adults," as the social workers call them, may be dropped off at the hospital but when it comes time to be released, their relatives refuse to take them back home to care for them. In the case, a middle-aged man got rid of his elderly mother by putting her in a taxi and sending it to a nonexistent address. The cab driver brought the woman to the hospital.

When I read these articles, I ask myself over and over, why, why in America? The middle-class family turns out an elderly relative while the Indian peasant cares for him. Is it because of that very abundance? Even in a time of penny-pinching as today, providing a home for the grandparents should still be possible. Is it that we are not experienced in sharing, even in poverty? Is it that we are not experienced in sacrificing? We ask first, what am I going to have to give up to do this? To top it off, to excuse our self-righteous individualism, we employ a variety of disparaging epithets. The old are called tiresome, stupid, different, untrustworthy, featherbrained and unfit for employment.

Can God love things this way? If American families are unhappy, we deserve it. "If you separate yourself from your parents, it means you are cutting yourself off from God," Reverend Moon says. That is because God's love flows down through the parents to the children. The only way we can have happiness is to have a loving home, a home where all three levels of love are present: parental love, conjugal love, and children's love. The only way we can be happy as individuals -- the only way to earn God's love -- is by becoming loving individuals.

"If you have grandparents, you must really be able to love these elderly people as you would God," says Reverend Moon. "Age-wise, you must unite the three loves within your own heart -- love for the old, love for the middle-aged, and love for the young. If your grandparents are dying, both your parents and yourself must be in the same degree of grief and sadness. If your parents were to pass away first, both your grandparents and yourself must feel the same grief about that. In your family, all will be one in heart."

That is the job we must accomplish.