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ON BEING AN ELDER

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By WILLIAM H. THOMAS

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.

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—former National Institute on Aging director Frank Williams and his wife, Carter Catlett Williams, the leading social worker in aging—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.

QUESTIONS OF ELDERHOOD

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?

I remember being at work in a nursing home one day when I was called on to do a history and physical examination of an elder recently admitted to the facility. I sat down with the woman and ran through the usual topics related to her diagnoses and medical history. Then I questioned her about her family. Quite unexpectedly, her eyes welled with tears. She told me that her mother had died when she was five years old. In those days, people believed that a widower should not be entrusted with the care of young children and so, following the custom of the time, she and her younger brother were sent to live with relatives. To distribute the burden, authorities sent her to one family and her brother to another. Over time, they lost contact. Now she lay in a bed in a nursing home, still grieving the loss of a mother, brother and father 75 years before.

Rarely have I felt so inadequate. My education and training had given very little attention to such difficulties. How could I hope to help her find peace within herself? The institution I worked in was well

prepared to deal with depression, psychosis and dementia but had next to nothing to offer those struggling with guilt and grief 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. 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.

WISDOM GIVERS

Adulthood never stops whispering in our ears, never stops reminding us that 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 elders: 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 California retirement community in the late 1990s. I presented a lecture on the Eden Alternative and then met privately with the organization's articulate, highly experienced executive director. 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 45 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 need, she could see them only as nitpicking 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, those men could have become wise, the elders of their 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.

STORIES VS. INFORMATION

The dynamic between the woman and the retired men at the retirement community 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—and stories are far more durable. The poet Muriel Rukeyser 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."

Elders' stories can be imbued with great value because the stories emerge from a life and a nature that gives precedence to being. 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. The rebirth of elderhood must include the concept of elders telling and others receiving the wisdom that only stories can hold.

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. ❖

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