



Esteeming Our Elders and Fostering Solidarity across Generations

"Compassionately attending to the needs of the elderly draws generations together and builds solidarity."



Occasionally we hear disturbing stories in the media about young people who perpetrate abuse against the elderly. In a widely reported 2009 story, for example, caretakers at the Quadrangle Assisted Living facility outside Philadelphia were charged in connection with the abuse of an elderly patient named Lois McCallister. Three employees, aged 19, 21 and 22 were caught on a surveillance camera as they taunted, mocked and assaulted the partially naked 78 year old woman.

She had begun complaining to visiting family members several months prior that someone was hurting her and hitting her. There were also initial signs of bruising on her hand and wrist. After bringing the bruises to the attention of the nursing home's administrators, the family was informed that the allegations were unfounded, and were told the accusations were simply the result of the patient's advancing dementia. Family members suspected there was more to it, and clandestinely installed the video camera, hidden in a clock in the victim's room.

After capturing the assailants on tape, they concluded that the abuse suffered by their mother had been ongoing for some time. One of the young women charged in the

case told investigators she was working on another floor the night the clock/camera captured the scene in the elderly woman's room. A family member later told news reporters, "They called the third girl down from another floor and said, 'Come down, we're going to start.'"

As a consequence of the abuse, the Department of Public Welfare eventually revoked the license for the facility, and the family filed a civil lawsuit against the parent company.

A tragic event like this leads to intense questioning about how these young people, charged with the special care of the older generation, could end up becoming so callous, inhuman, and brutal. What can be done to prevent this kind of "inter-generational disconnect" from occurring in the future? And what can be done to build up unity and respect between generations?

A nearly universal point of reference over the years, and a counsel of incalculable worth, has been the injunction enshrined in the Decalogue: *Honor your father and mother*. A decision to abide by this commandment invariably serves to strengthen the concern of children for their parents and elders, and helps forge a bond

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between the generations. The Book of Sirach offers similarly sage advice:

“My son, take care of your father when he is old; grieve him not as long as he lives. Even if his mind fail, be considerate of him; revile him not all the days of his life; kindness to a father will not be forgotten, firmly planted against the debt of your sins...”

In a sense, it is precisely the weakness and vulnerability of the elderly that beckons us to manifest a greater respect towards them, and never to mistreat them in the strength of youth. As Pope John Paul II beautifully summed it up in his 1999 *Letter to the Elderly*:

“...the signs of human frailty which are clearly connected with advanced age become a summons to the mutual dependence and indispensable solidarity which link the different generations...”

Compassionately attending to the needs of the elderly draws generations together and builds solidarity.

When the unique gifts of the

elderly are invested and shared with the younger generation, this, too, builds up solidarity. Elderly people help us see human affairs with a sense of perspective tempered by experience, reflection and wisdom. Whenever grandparents contribute to the raising and formation of the grandchildren, even by doing something as simple as teaching them how to pray and think about God, they strengthen inter-generational ties, and build family unity.

We can foster intergenerational care and support within our families and communities in other simple ways as well, for example, through conscientious parenting, including small but important steps such as insisting on meal time together as a family (which builds up mutual respect and concern for others in the family); teaching compassion by visiting sick or elderly neighbors together; teaching children to welcome all human life, even when weak or handicapped; praying together as a family; decreasing media time and guarding against violent computer/video games, pornography and other practices that dehumanize people and make them seem like objects to be manipulated.

As we seek to build relational

bridges across generations, and work to construct a society that esteems its elders, we simultaneously build up homes and communities that are liberated of the threat of abuse or neglect — places of safety, mutual support and love, even as the hairs on our head turn gray and our strength wanes.

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