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Pintas & Mullins' Quality of Life Scholarship

18 March 2021

### Scholarship Essay

My grandfather died two years ago, suddenly and unexpectedly. He was a diabetic with Parkinson's Disease, which slowly shut down his body. Over the course of his life, he grew frail and weak, while he transitioned from cane to wheelchair to jazzy. Soon, he came to struggle with even the most minimal functions. By the end of his life, he could barely move his mouth, and so, although he tried his hardest, his speech was a mumble at best. Most often, we could not understand him, and he would hate himself and his condition all the more.

As a teenager, I couldn't help but pity him. But it was an empty pity, a selfish pity: I scorned him in my heart. In my eyes, he was no more than a pathetic old man and an inconvenience to my youthful life. I didn't want to spend time with him. I barely felt connected to him. My mother would ask me to see him and I would sigh. But mostly, I forgot about him, ignored his inconveniencing existence. When he died, I regretted this. I felt so deeply terrible for it. Because, instead of his weakness and frailty, his death highlighted to me his strength, his ability to live on through his sufferings despite his loneliness, and still support me and my siblings as best he could. I remembered him with his binoculars, hunched over and focused, trying to find me on the soccer field, to watch and cheer me on. I remembered him with his hat in his hands, placed over his heart, mumbling a holiday prayer from the head of the dinner table. I remembered the bowl of bubble gum he kept freshly stocked, the dollar bill he had on hand, so that, when we visited him, he could give us treats for our newest art project. I didn't remember his purple and swollen ankles, his crusted eyes and jittery hands. I remembered my grandfather, stuck in a chair but still moving in it, almost beyond it, to see us as much as he could. And it

struck me: I had ignored him, *my* grandfather, avoided him and let him die alone, probably thinking I did not care for him much at all.

As sad and intensely heavy as it is, this story leads us to our first attempt at an answer: we ought to do the opposite of what I did; for I wronged my grandfather, and it probably hurt him more than I could know. Instead, we ought to do right by our elders. And doing right by our elders means, at minimum, giving them our presence, attention, and compassion—in short, our loyalty. I should have listened to and seen my grandfather, as a human being of immeasurable worth, a soul weathered and well-travelled, and I should have taken interest in him, as much as I should have let him take interest in me. And this is, most simply, because I am indebted to him. My mother is his daughter. I am her son. Which means that, without him, I would have no mother to be the son of. But, of course, at the time I didn't see it that way. As a teenager, I hated my grandfather for inconveniencing my youthful life. But, without my grandfather, I would have no "youthful life" at all. And this circles back round to that first answer: I owed my grandfather my gratitude, not simply a feeling or sentiment but an expression of the will, a kind of gratitude in action. I owed him a gift—me.

Now, not everyone has an "elder" left in their family. A good many are probably like me, and their grandparents have passed on. But elders continue to make up our society. Indeed, this will never change. As long as there is society, there will be elders of some sort. And because of this, we must broaden our first answer.

I look back on my childhood and out into the world and find that my attitude towards my grandfather is not new or peculiar to myself. All over, elders are a hated and despised category. Simply their old age, their wrinkles and achy joints, disqualifies them from contemporary social life. They just don't fit the way we live. They can't keep up. They don't look or talk or walk the

way we need them to. And so we lock them away. Just look at the nursing home—at its worst the symbol of the elders' inconvenience. Of course, this is it only at its worst, the nursing home taken to its extreme. But I cannot help but think, for all the good the nursing home provides, that it makes forgetfulness all the more natural. The youth live on. Their elders die alone and forgotten, left to their pudding cups and bingo nights. No wonder elders today struggle to find meaning in their lives. No wonder suicide rates have increased among retirees. No wonder depression and anxiety crush the modern nursing home. Most elders are alone, and they know it.

Now then, this brings us to our second point, and it follows from the first—our elders deserve not to be forgotten. In fact, they deserve to be personally recognized. And beyond recognition, they deserve our engagement with them, even those outside of our family. Our elders deserve to be seen, known, and personally cared for, not only and always by white-aproned nurses but the ordinary men and women of society too. Concerning the nursing home: on the one hand, it is a symbol of commitment to elderly care; on the other hand, it can quickly transcend the symbol and become an end itself, a natural excuse for ourselves not to care. We must always mean by it the first and never extend it to the second.

Overall, our elders deserve a place at the table, a significant place in our social life together. And this is because, similar with our grandparents, we are indebted to them. Our society was first theirs, and they preserved it and passed it on to us. And, although they failed in some ways, they found great success in others, and their life has shaped our identity. The least we can do is honor them accordingly. And if we do this, if we recognize our indebtedness to them, their claim on us by virtue of their having gone before us, and if we engage with them accordingly, showing them our gratitude as we listen to them, walk with them, and care for them, then I should think their lives would be enriched with all sorts of meaning.

Of course, this leaves a few questions open. How do we actually honor our elders? What are we to do? What does it look like to do those things? And what do those things entail? I cannot claim to know an answer for each, but I have a few thoughts nonetheless.

First, I think we ought to press into our family loyalties. In particular, if we have a grandparent or an elder figure to whom we are related, and if that person lives close enough to us, we ought to learn to spend time with them, not all at once or unsustainably but slowly and progressively, gradually including them in our ordinary life. In this, we declare to them that they are ours by showing them that they are ours.

Second, I think ought to press into our immediate communities. Now, this could be anything really—a religious group, a college town, a neighborhood, a workplace. In each case, we ought to press into the whole community, not just those most like us or demographically familiar but the elderly too. Over time, we might have conversations or walks or meals with the elderly, hear their stories from the past or even exhortations for the future. But this requires a kind of relational openness, an awareness and effort to see and know the elderly. And so we ought to practice, with effort and persistence, this kind of relational openness. In this, we declare that they are meaningful—by showing them open and explicit respect.

Third, I think we ought to reach out to isolated elderly communities—in particular, the nursing home. Instead of depending on the elderly to come to us, we ought to go to them. By “we”, I mean here particularly concentrated groups of youth, such as religious youth groups, college student bodies, wilderness scouts, and sports teams. By “reach out”, I mean here a range of activities: joining the weekly bingo night, singing carols at the nursery doorstep, coloring or card-making with them, or simply eating together. Any of these options, and many more, would effectively merge the elderly and youth communities together through shared experience. And

this would benefit both parties. By incorporating the elderly into the primary itinerary of youth communities, not only would the elderly feel seen and known but the youth would develop a sense of normalcy around the elderly.

Overall, I think it is really quite intuitive: the elderly deserve meaningful relationship; the youth owe it to them. But it is another thing to put intuition into action. Because of this, I should think we need exemplars as much as we need to go out and do certain things. Imitation is key here. I would locate those exemplars, those whom we are to imitate, in the parenthood. Our parents are our first relational teachers. And so, again, this takes us back round to family, and the assumption that the family is the training ground for any kind of broader compassion. So, the elderly—well, the quality of elderly life thus depends on the quality of family life. If our parents teach us well, then we will be more inclined to love our elders. If not, then, well—our situation might not change much at all. Of course, this is no guarantee. My parents taught me well and yet I still chose the wrong path. But, in general, I would say that the family is the solution. From the family comes a strong sense of communal responsibility. And in this, our elders are taken care of.