



Justice and Advocacy

*Remember the days of old;
consider the generations long past.
Ask your father and he will tell you,
your elders, and they will explain to you. (Deuteronomy 32:7 NIV)*

It has been said that in white Australia we have old people but not elders.. The argument is put that if we truly respected our elders, we would not have a decimated and under-funded aged care system, we would not tolerate a residential or in home care service that does not properly care for the elders of our society in a way that truly honours their lifelong contribution to building the country that we now enjoy.

The irony of this reality in Australia is that we have among us First Nations and migrant cultures that by default honour their elders with deep respect. They are honoured for the wisdom they carry, for the years of experience they hold and for the gift of life they have given to younger generations. It is simply unconscionable that the younger generations ignore, isolate or neglect the care of their elders particularly in extended family relationships.

I remember clearly one day when I was speaking to one of the residents in one of our aged care homes and glanced over shoulder to the scene across the passageway outside their door. There I watched as a young PCA (Personal Care Assistant) who I recognised as a Karen refugee woman from my community, gently cared for a white elderly man with severe dementia. The way she knelt before him, gently held his hands and looked into his eyes speaking words of comfort and respect, moved me to tears.

Now that I am in my sixties, I am far more conscious of my mortality and the fact that on average I have lived 70% of my life. I have a deep appreciation for the modest amount of wisdom I now have. I often quip to my friends and loved ones that I would like to take my 62 year-old mind and put it back in my 42 year-old body!!

But when we are young it is so easy to feel and act as though we ourselves will never grow old, and thus its easy to ignore the relevance or contribution of older people in our world, to assume that they are so removed from our experience that they will not understand or be able to offer worthwhile advice..

What a mistake this is! And what a sad situation it is when we miss out on the wisdom our elders have and richness that listening to them an offer to all of us.

The Bible is clear in its teaching about respecting our elders. I know from our Chaplains reports, that the joy of their work in spiritual and pastoral care of our aged care residents, comes from the wonderful and fascinating stories of life that they all carry and the wisdom they treasure if only we would stop to listen enough to hear it. Respect and love for our elders is the essence of authentic pastoral care.



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Questions and Suggestions for Reflection:

1. Who are the elders in your life and community? List them on a piece of paper. Decide to visit at least one of them in the next month and sit and listen.
2. If you don't know any particular elders, get in touch with the Chaplain at one of our aged care homes and ask them to identify someone in their home who is feeling isolated and whom you could visit and spend some time with.

In closing let me share with you a beautiful poem written by Cameron Semmens after visiting one of Baptcare's aged care homes in 2016.

Geoff Wraight (Head of Spiritual Care at Baptcare)

Age is Not Wisdom, But it Can Be - Cameron Semmens

I am watching the way
100 year-old fingers
cradle a floral tea cup –
both as fragile
as the other.

I am listening to the way
stories – 80 years old,
traumas – 80 years on
(ancient history to most)
still make eyes sparkle
with tears.

I am laughing at the way
twiddling your thumbs
moves from a form of procrastination
to an exercise in the fitness class for over
90s.

I am thinking of the way
everything changes –
furniture, fashion, technology, demography
–
where ladies raised under 'White Australia'
are loved into lunch
and carried into the weekend
by Indians and Asians and Africans.

I am held, held by the way eyelids,
give in to gravity (or the weight of years);

by the way century-old skin crinkles like
crepe paper;
by the way age is not wisdom, but it can be.

I am cheered by the way
framed photos of grandkids
are more revered
than Renoirs.

I am paused
by the way, in old age,
past and present, self and story
can fracture and abstract
like a Picasso;
sometimes with an ugly loss of sense and
reason,
but sometimes, beautifully.

I am loving the way *everyone*
responds to acts of kindness
and the way *anyone*
can make someone's day
by the simple act of listening.

I am humbled,
humbled by the way
not all of us will grow old – this old –
but we all will age
and there is always
something to learn from the past
and something to learn of the future.