

**With Respect to Age:  
Taking the Risk of Learning from  
Older People**

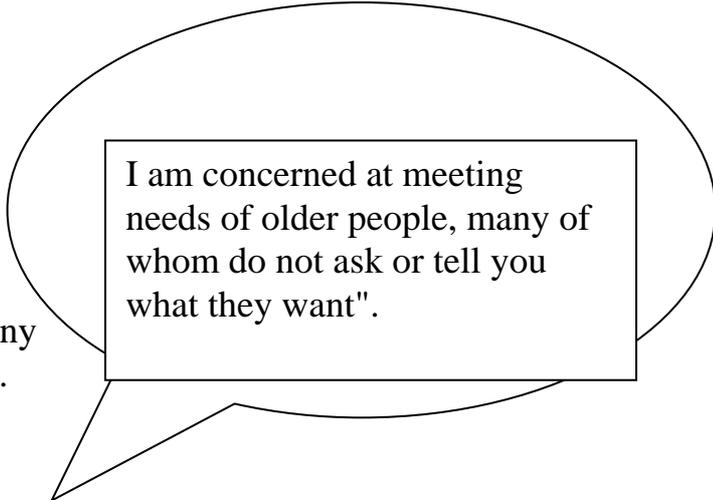
By  
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One of the problems of professionals and professionalism occurs when there is a power imbalance between those who provide care and those who are cared for. It is part of the challenge of Christian discipleship to reflect upon the meaning and effect of this imbalance and to improve the quality of both our theoretical and practical approaches to care.

I work within a small Anglican charity on the outskirts of Birmingham, which for over 300 hundred years has provided care for the frail elderly. We are an independent Christian foundation able to innovate and to ensure that our structures serve the needs of older people. In our developing model of excellence the Leveson Centre for the Study of Ageing, Spirituality and Social Policy was launched in January 2001 to provide an inter-professional network for the exploration of some of the issues relating to the care of older people.

Following a small conference last year exploring the needs of older people, several individuals, unable to attend in person, shared their reflections with me. A Matron of a local nursing home said, "I am concerned at meeting needs of older people, many of whom do not ask or tell you what they want". I thought it was a fascinating comment for a number of reasons.



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Her sense that there are needs amongst that Matron's residents that are not being met. I wondered why? Is it to do with financial constraints? The inevitable challenge and difficulties over staffing levels? Is there not enough time to spend listening? Perhaps the problem lies in the difficulty of understanding, given the current framework of definitions. Is it possible or desirable to build into care plans the spiritual or non-physical dimensions? Is there a framework that can guide us through? If we can agree on a set of definitions, what will help us respond to those non-physical needs? The theory must relate to practice or else we all become pragmatists, who view thinking as an unnecessary luxury, or for those who like that kind of thing!

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that silence older people.

We live in a culture where older people are under valued. Part of the risk of respecting age is that we have to ask some fundamental questions about our participation in a culture in which older people are disempowered and devalued. We have to examine the assumptions that silence older people. We give them what we would least want - a compliant institution, kindly in its intentions, but with a tendency to disempower and disable. Put another way, what would we want for our loved ones, or for ourselves? If people do not tell us what they want, then we should question the shape of our organisations, the theory of our professionalism, the nature of our faith communities and institutions, and the processes by which we institutionalise people.

Now I want to rum to four areas of the spirituality of ageing which pose challenges to each of us in relation to our fundamental patterns of believing and responding.

There is real risk in listening and empowering older people.

First: what is the meaning of vocation? Or, perhaps put in a more theological way, what does God want of us at any particular moment of our being or living? We put so much investment in work as the primary source of our value and meaning, that older people who may be outside that frame, invite us to take the risk of exploring what our lives mean. From where, ultimately, do we get our value? Sometimes we regard older people with fear or sadness, because they have been unable to live with the loss of work and the abiding sense of grief that that loss may bring. As Martin Luther puts it: In vocational terms how do we reframe the sense of self and worth apart from our work role?

Next, how do we embrace finitude? Old age brings with it a whole number of limitations that take all kinds of shapes and forms. They may be physical or financial: they may be social, spiritual and vocational. Part of our spiritual task is to achieve faith and values that enable us, and others, to work with, hold and transcend the immediate limits of the self, This is an area of human life in which social workers have an enormous amount of wisdom, through your understanding of human nature and the processes that diminish individuals and groups. As Christians we need to work together to find within these processes the possibilities of hope, mystery, depth and faith.

Thirdly, have we faced the anxieties around non-being? The ageing process, combined with the death of those closest to us, makes us more certain of our own death. It continues to be surprising that we fail to embrace the reality of our own mortality, that many of us come to death very poorly prepared.

Older people face us with the challenge of understanding who we are and what is the meaning of our ultimate destiny, our humanity and mortality.

The fourth aspect I want to consider is how do we enhance autonomy? This area of opening up our own lives and experiences to what older people have to teach us relates to questions of power and control in professional work. How do we empower older people to live as fully and richly as possible? We should always talk about work done *with* and not work done *for*. Part of the challenge of spiritual care is, so to connect with those with whom we work, that together, at whatever age, we can discover and rediscover the unique growth opportunities of our living. This affirms the bonds of the human condition and our desire to live in a community where all can both belong and participate.

Our lives are a journey towards or away from wisdom, which will not be complete until all of us come to terms with what Eric Erickson calls "The inalterability of the past and the unknowability of the future". There is a story of a woman who came across Michelangelo in his studio, chipping away at a beautiful block of marble. Shocked by the waste, as the pieces of marble piled up, she rebuked the sculptor. He replied, "The more the marble wastes the more the statue grows". Part of the risk of respecting old age is to ensure that as this wasting process takes place, older people are valued and something of greater value is being allowed to grow.

I often wonder why many people avoid deeper, more meaningful relationships with older people. This is something that happens at all levels. Carers care without engaging: religion can happen without truly attending to the richness and complexity of human experience. Perhaps there is part of us all that denies the ageing process and fears what older people represent. We need to come to terms with the "elderly stranger" within ourselves. We need to free ourselves to take risks, to respond, to listen, to learn and to grow in dignity towards our ultimate destiny and towards our friends who are older.

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