

What Are Old People For?

Last Saturday morning, almost 100 elder care attorneys and geriatric care managers convened in Chicago and listened to Dr. William Thomas pose the question: “What are old people for? There are lots of them around – you know, they’re everywhere! And when you wake up in the morning, there are more of them.” He spoke it somewhat facetiously, but quickly and seriously said that it is a “fundamental” question for America. You see, Dr. Thomas is a geriatric physician and the founder of the Eden Alternative and Green House concepts for nursing home care, which seek to replace “institutional” nursing home environments with more home-like facilities that include plants, animals, activities and freedoms that increase enjoyment of daily life. His comments resonated with us. I and my certified Geriatric Care Manager, Leigh, are members of the Life Care Planning Law Firms Association and are dedicated to helping elders and their families find, plan for and preserve legal, financial and healthcare independence and quality of life.

Dr. Thomas, in his book “What Are Old People For?,” notes that deep questions about what it means to grow old go back thousands of years. One illustration he shared is the ancient Greek story of Eos and Tithonus. Eos, the goddess of Dawn, was a beautiful young daughter of Zeus, god of the Sun. Eos had a thing for handsome young mortal men. The primary object of her affections was a young Trojan prince named Tithonus. Eos had two sons by Tithonus and loved him greatly, but a problem arose when the couple realized that Tithonus, being mortal, was aging and would continue to do so. Tithonus begged Eos for immortality, and Eos begged her father Zeus to grant his wish (but forgot to ask for eternal youth for Tithonus). Zeus granted the couple's wish, despite his reservations about the idea. Tithonus was indeed granted immortality - but the two did NOT live happily ever after. Here's why: Tithonus had been granted eternal life, but NOT eternal youth. So Tithonus grew older, and when he got really old and unattractive he begged Eos for death - but once immortal, there's no changing things back. According to the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, "but when loathsome old age pressed full upon him, and he could not move nor lift his limbs, this seemed to her in her heart the best counsel: she laid him in a room and put to the shining doors. There he babbles endlessly, and no more has strength at all, such as once he had in his supple limbs." The myth holds that, while she could not grant him

death, she ultimately had remorse for him and turned him into a grasshopper instead and released him into the world.

The moral of this story? Aging is intrinsic to our human nature. To live is to age. Even the ancient Greeks understood this. The tragedy Dr. Thomas finds in our society is that we fight against this nature and view aging as a negative. We recognize “childhood” as that stage of life in which children experience and exhibit certain expected patterns of physical and intellectual growth and development. We recognize “adulthood” as the stage of life during which adults express their maturity, power and abilities independently in ways beneficial to themselves and their society. However, according to Dr. Thomas, we have not embraced the stage of “elderhood” in the same manner as many other cultures, and indeed our own country in earlier times. Some cultures revere their elders as having the wisdom and values not yet entrusted to younger adults. (An Alaskan Indian tribe views a person with dementia who sees deceased family and friends as having one foot in the spirit world and one foot in this world – a power granted to only a few.) In America, however, even though aging results in some losses (muscle mass, reproductive capacity, youthful appearance), we have tended to marginalize, restrict and confine older persons who can no longer act like or “do” what we expect of independent adults. Thus, elders have been taught to hate their older selves because they are not the powerful, vigorous, attractive former selves. This results in elders striving to maintain the appearance that they are still able to function in the adulthood stage for fear that, if they cannot fulfill these (possibly unrealistic) expectations, they will face institutionalization and isolation. As Thomas puts it, “trying to live in the adulthood phase forever is a game you will lose.”

Elderhood, as viewed by Dr. Thomas, is a stage in life AFTER the adulthood phase, during which the elder is not expected to achieve all that younger adults are but is respected for what he is uniquely able to contribute – nurture for the young (grandparenting was invented by the human race) and conveying wisdom, values and experience of a lifetime to the generation coming behind. If we aspire to such a respectful view of our elders, then we might show it by encouraging them to be at peace and harmony with themselves as they are. As Dr. Thomas said, he loves to tell his older patients and Green House residents: “You know that face and that body you have? Well, it’s exactly the face and body you’re supposed to have! And you are beautiful.”