



Review and Reflection

BY
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NICE NAMES are frequently devised to cover up situations that are not so nice. "Act of faith" was the name used for the burning of heretics. When the income tax in the U.S. started biting really hard, the Bureau of Internal Revenue changed its name to Internal Revenue Service.

Today, "old age" goes by the name of "the later years," and an old person is called a "senior citizen." This alone should indicate trouble and observation bears this out. The generation gap in our society now appears to be a three-way split: youth alienated from the middle years, the middle years alienated from old age.

One of the many unsolved paradoxes of our time is the situation with respect to old age. We boast of medical science having increased the average human life span considerably. Yet the added years seem to be an embarrassment and an encumbrance to society. An old person is no longer allowed to die in peace without all the paraphernalia of modern medicine rushed to keep his life going a little longer. And if the patient does live, we don't know what to do with him.

Increasingly, elderly people are being put out of sight. Modern married couples, trying to raise a family and keep up with the economic demands on them, find—or think—they cannot keep parents too, and so they try to find a place to put them.

The problem seems to revolve mostly around urban people in the middle income bracket. The well-to-do can take care of themselves and the elderly rich need worry only about pesky doctors and meddling relatives. The poor somehow have a way of managing. Starting with little they have little to lose. In less developed cultures the old folks have a place in society and a function to perform. They supply memories of old times and the wisdom that comes with age. They provide "charisma," lubrication for the family, and affection and attention to the young ones.

But with middle classes in modern civilized society, no function has been found for old people. The emphasis is on youthful maturity and the productive years. The older years which ought to be the harvest years are feared and avoided. Old people are put out of sight as though to spare others the reminder of what we must all become.

But the problem is *where* to put the old folks. Many end their days in hospital. Many are dumped into state

mental institutions even though there is nothing wrong with them save a few eccentricities. But this saves the family the cost of caring for them. The cost to the old folks is much more terrible. Though they may begin relatively normally, mental symptoms do develop as a result of abandonment and neglect. Apathy and depression ensue and death follows soon after.

Nursing homes are almost as dismal. Besides, they are so expensive as to be out of reach—hence the temptation to resort to the public institutions. Another proposed solution is the development of "retirement communities"—housing projects catering to the needs of the elderly. This is trying to put a good face on the effort to push old people aside. And since this enterprise is costly too, there is a clamour for public funds to support such ventures. Nowadays, virtually every problem ends with "more government support" as the proposed solution. It is extraordinary that responsible leaders can think of nothing but this economic dead end.

The move toward putting old people off by themselves is sociologically as well as economically unsound. It robs society of the richness that comes of having all ages intermingled. Every age group has something to offer and something it needs from the others. There is a certain amount of natural segregation of age groups, but there is also a natural mingling. Artificial and institutionalized segregation is not conducive either to the individual or the general good.

There is also something self-deceptive, even fraudulent, about the proceedings. For in dealing with old people, the people of middle years seem to be denying that they too must grow old. They seem to be shutting their eyes to the realization that in fewer years than they care to think about, younger people are going to do the same thing to them. Yet that fear and realization lurks beneath the surface, explaining much curious behaviour.

Labour unions are in a constant turmoil. More and more, labour troubles have to do with retirement benefits rather than with current pay. Retirement carries with it not a sense of relief and reward, but the feeling of being cast off, of becoming a problem, of not knowing what to do with oneself, of insecurity. A good deal of the dishonesty in business and politics is motivated by the desire to fend for one's old age. Meanwhile, the evil day is put off as long as possible with frantic scurrings and boasting.

This should not be. Life should be of one piece and within the matrix of society, birth, youth, maturity, old age and death should be a procession that is fully accepted and allowed for. That this is not so indicates a profound disorder in our society. We seem to be schizophrenically split in all directions.

It is evident that the problem is basically an economic one. Making a decent living—in a way that provides for one's old age—holds the key to the problem. When we can solve the problem of having progress without poverty we will be a fair way towards solving old age as a social problem.