



By Gordon Dalbey

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From Cure to Care: A Prescription for Ministry to Seniors

Sovereign Lord, I put my hope in you; I have trusted in you since I was young. I have relied on you all my life; you have always protected me since the day I was born. I will always praise you... Do not reject me now that I am old; do not abandon me now that I am feeble. (Psalm 71:9)

Some years ago, our church Outreach Board visited a local convalescent hospital in hopes of starting an ongoing visitation program there, and the social director welcomed us with a startling perspective.

"It's a sad fact," she declared, "but not many people really want to help out with older folks in their 70's and 80's, like we care for here. Look at the 'candy strippers' and other volunteer programs in regular hospitals--they often have waiting lists. But here...." She paused, sighing. "They just don't come."

"Why not?" we asked, puzzled.

"I think it's just that in a general hospital, people go to get cured," she offered. "They go there hoping to leave and lead a better life afterwards. The doctors and nurses and volunteer workers--even the administrators--all get that feeling, and they like it. But here, as old as our people are, it's impossible to get that feeling. Many of our patients will never leave here, and even those who do, can't realistically expect to live a better life."

Today, after years of ministry among nursing home residents, I've come to understand that truth. What's more, I've discovered that ministry to the aging fosters a perspective that's foundational to Christian ministry itself.

The key question for those called to minister to the aging is this: What pains do we feel most deeply as we get older? One powerful answer comes from the ancient psalmist (above).

The text indicates that aging bears a fear that has been with the human species for literally thousands of years, namely, that you will be cast off alone, "rejected" and "abandoned." Ministry to the aging must therefore focus on the pain which that experience brings. Therefore, it must grow out of a willingness to look at our own selves more deeply, to see how we all participate in this fear of rejection and abandonment, regardless of our age.

Indeed, when I first went to minister at the nursing home, I recall the terrible fear that swept over me as I beheld so many people with such broken bodies--doing absolutely nothing with their lives! Desperately, I prayed and cried out to God to deliver me from that fear.

In time, I began to see that the condition of residents in the home was forcing into my consciousness a deep sense of purposelessness and depression that had lurked in my own life long before ever visiting there. Among so many persons apparently so near to death, I began to face as well my own deep fear of death.

Through prayer and counseling which focused on facing and overcoming this inner brokenness of my own, I found not only courage to endure in the nursing home ministry, but also the strength of faith to rejoice in it. I began to see myself among the residents there as simply a fellow human being broken by the powers of the world--and at last, redeemed and empowered by Jesus Christ to new life in love for others.

The flood of appreciation for my leading hymns, preaching and listening patiently to individuals there nurtured my own soul, and I found myself more uplifted when I left than when I arrived.

At first, I had panicked: "What in the world can I possibly preach to so helpless and hopeless a condition?" Having faced my own helplessness and hopelessness, however, I had discovered that Jesus Christ is the only help and hope for our broken human condition (Ephes. 1:18-23). And indeed, this was precisely the word also for my broken, redeemed brothers and sisters in the nursing home. In fact, I realized that this is my only license to preach anywhere--even among those who have no physical disability.

Thus, the late Henri Nouwen declared that ministering to the aging requires that we be open to "our own fears and doubts." (pamphlet, "Care and the Elderly")

Indeed, our compulsive glorification of youth implies that aging is an unstoppable monster. Doctors from the best medical schools can't make you younger; psychologists have no therapy, social workers have no program, and ministers have no prayer that does it. In a world that worships the work of human hands, the process of aging remains the Great Embarrassment that laughs in the face of all our greatest human pretensions.

Hence, our fear of aging people: their very presence mocks our pride in human accomplishment. That is precisely why a Christian might begin to look for God's hand amid the aging process: because all those pretensions of our own power keep us clinging to our disastrously selfish illusions of control. Aging shatters our human idol and allows God at last to reclaim us.

How, then, can we Christians help patients in a nursing home? What is the Good News we proclaim to our aging brothers and sisters? And how do we communicate that Good News as the "Word become flesh?"

Listen again to Henri Nouwen, as he suggests that the wisdom of old age is not so much the cumulative experience you gather as you get older, but rather, the ability to recognize the deepest human needs which the process of aging uncovers:

The wisdom of old age says not only that all human healers have to face death, the great mocker of all cures, but also that through the love of a caring friend we can come in touch with the deeper cravings of life. This wisdom makes us aware not only of the illusions of immortality, but also shows us new life whenever someone says with a word or gesture, "I see your pain. I cannot take it away, but I won't leave you alone."

The cross is clear evidence that God meet us in our pain unto death, and doesn't abandon us in it. The Good News for those called to serve our aging brothers and sisters is that we are called not to cure in the image of our own fears and frantic desire to escape pain, but rather, we are called to care in the image of the God who never abandons us, even in death itself. The Good News is that when we stand with one another in times of pain and suffering, we become most like Jesus: broken, and transformed thereby into new life, freed and empowered at last to love one another as God loves us.

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