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**JOURNEYING THROUGH OLD AGE AND ILLNESS**

**Leo Missinne**

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# **Journeying through Old Age and Illness**

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## About the author

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## Foreword

Professor Leo Missinne's Leveson Paper makes a rich contribution to the studies to which the Leveson Centre is dedicated. It covers a broad canvas and addresses the situations and needs of many different groups, so many in fact that only those who truly feel no difficulty in suffering or no response to it are excluded. Some of us play the roles described one at a time in the course of our lives, others are so placed that their lives are multi-faceted, and all the more problematic (or truly rich?) as a result.

The paper opens with a meditative consideration of suffering in all its universality and diversity, and in its many styles and degrees. We consider the virtues to be found in suffering, virtues which may indeed never surface in a particular life without the situation of suffering. So suffering can be the necessary occasion of good. We see this put, briefly, in the context of the Christian tradition (to which it is of course central), but mostly we have devout wisdom, meditatively presented.

We turn to the specific trials, characteristics and opportunities of ageing and old age itself; and finally (and usefully) to the attitudes necessary for the effective care of the elderly. Here there is much imaginative and useful insight, highlighting best practice.

It is a paper which pauses to express what is a way we all know but are rarely in a position to stop and explore.

*Leslie Houlden*  
*Temple Balsall*

## **Journeying through Old Age and Illness**

Every human being has his or her own character and personality. No two persons are identical. Because of the experiences of a lifetime, older people differ more than when they were children.

Each sick person has his or her own personality. There is no such thing as a variety of illnesses, but a variety of sick persons, each one different from another, even if they suffer from the same illness. Hence, it is very important that the carer knows his or her patient, and learns to fathom the psychology of that particular person.

We have to realise that each man or woman grew up in their own particular era and this coloured a whole set of values and norms of conduct which differ from ours of today. Moreover, do not forget there is a wide trench between theory and practice, between what we say and what we do. As the poet Wilhelm Willms expressed it:

Don't you know that being close to someone  
Can make you sick or well, living or dead?  
Don't you know that being close to someone  
Can make you good or bad, sad or joyful?  
That the absence of someone can let you die?  
That the coming of someone can keep you alive?  
That the voice of someone can help the deaf to hear?  
Don't you know that a word or a gesture can teach the blind to see,  
to see the meaning of their life in this world?  
Don't you know that to have time for someone is the best medicine?  
Sometimes more effective than a successful operation?  
Don't you know that just listening to someone can work miracles?  
You know all that already?  
... And don't you know that the road between knowing and doing,  
between words and their realisation  
is long, long indeed?

(Deleu et al 1986, 168 [my translation])

### **Old age and suffering**

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No one speaks easily about suffering, still less about the suffering of older people. We prefer to blank it from our awareness. And if it does come to strike us, we tend to rebel, to lose courage and just do not know how to integrate it into our lives. Suffering is well and truly part and parcel of being old, in stark contrast to the older generation as presented by the media. There, one sees only older people as happy, brimming with health, always on holiday and voyaging from one exotic country to another.

## **Suffering is an integral part of living**

The value of suffering has been greatly underplayed in our western culture. We are offered the utopian vision of a life free from pain, suffering and death. You could call our generation the 'valium-generation'. For each ache or pain, present or to come, we demand an effective remedy or tranquilliser. And so we forget that suffering is inextricably linked with human existence. This link becomes clearer the more we are forced to retreat on all fronts, physical and psychological. During this period of life, suffering is often reinforced by the concomitant distress of solitude and the steady decline of our physical powers.

We all suffer because we know what it means to be happy. Well-being and suffering are not opposing poles but parts of one and the same reality: life. To be happy always includes the possibility of suffering and, conversely, suffering contains the seeds of well-being. That is why certain individuals refuse to love or to be loved, knowing that love is equally a source of suffering. Moreover, the happiness of today can be threatened tomorrow and give rise to all kinds of physical and moral pain.

There are also people who deny themselves lots of things and accept great suffering for a much greater good. A woman suffers greatly to bring a child into the world. A student painfully assimilates hundreds of lectures to gain a diploma and so enter a profession. Many people forgo appetising delicacies for the good of their health or their figure. To dream of a life without suffering is to forget that suffering has always been part and parcel of human existence. The conscious acceptance of our lot of suffering is the challenge facing us all as human beings. If we are insensitive to suffering we are no more than inanimate beings. All creativity is closed to us. We will never savour the joy of overcoming difficult situations or finding solutions to all kinds of problems. An American author puts it this way:

If humanity no longer has the capacity to suffer, all that is left is a narrow path with few chances of knowing what being a human really means. To live means to be involved and give yourself completely for the world and for others, and that always implies the possibility of suffering. To suppress all suffering means the loss of any possibility of profound joy. To deny suffering rebounds to deprive man of the chance of giving meaning and direction to his life through suffering. Hence existence becomes little more than an incessant pursuit of pleasure and fake happiness, a series of experiences, banal, insignificant, futile and empty.

(Moller 1986–7, 129)

We must all carry our cross. However, our attention can be so fixed on our own cross that we forget to look around and see that others also have theirs. So often we fail to see that others have equally heavy burdens. The brighter side of their lives blinds us to their drab and painful side. No one goes through

life free of pain and problems. No age group is spared this. Let us just say that one can suffer with varying intensity at different times. Children, adolescents, adults and the very old must all face one or other form of suffering.

Suffering can have a real or an imaginary cause, and it is the latter which can be the gravest and hardest to carry. Sometimes we suffer because of circumstances, or as a result of our own or other people's hurtful actions. Suffering can hit the good and generous without warning and explanation. Why must the good suffer so much, while the bad get away scot-free? That's a question without an answer and which we will never be able to unravel in an entire life-time.

Victor Frankl's book *Man's Search for Meaning* has touched the hearts of millions seeking meaning in their suffering. Having survived the Nazi concentration camps, Frankl knows only too well what undergoing such a terrible ordeal means. His book shows how it is possible not to be crushed by suffering, and even for one's humanity to grow. He saw there a task to be taken up, a mission no one else could fulfil in his place. This we must accept to be unique and irreplaceable, even in suffering.

No one can completely understand another's suffering, still less know how to master it fully. Each and every one of us must bear our own suffering. That is why fundamentally we remain alone in our suffering, which we can integrate into our life only in a personal and unique way.

Suffering is often a heavy burden. From time to time people say: 'Now, it is really too much.' The only thing we can do for such a person is to try and suffer with them, be with them and go a part of the way with them. That is not only a help for them but a support for ourselves. That is because sick people can also encourage, console and inspire everyone around them. Those who suffer witness not only to the 'outside' but also to the 'inside' of their suffering. They neither lecture nor moralise, but offer bystanders something more important: they show us effectively how to cure our very own suffering.

Human beings can overcome the most demanding situations. We can do that, not just because we want to continue living or affirming ourselves, but because we love and are loved. To be aware of being loved does not depend entirely on a physical presence. Some people who dwell in the same house can become strangers to one another, while those who truly love each other remain close and intimate even when they are an ocean apart. This is possible only if there is real love. So no distance, even if it be thousands of miles, can separate them. The pain of distance serves merely to strengthen the bonds of love.

Some folk, of a stoical tendency, strive sometimes to rise above suffering, to be oblivious to it. Others find love and liberation in suffering. Scientific researchers can make heavy sacrifices in the hope that the results of their labour will make people happier, improve their health and lead to a better-organised society. Through enterprises, schools and social institutions, efforts

are made daily to help the population at large. We are well aware that financial returns play an important role in all these activities. But if money is the sole motive then the painful aspects of work result in it being destructive rather than creative. Suffering is fruitful only because it is seen in terms of one's neighbour. To acquire a truly profound humanity, the fruits of suffering and the efforts to overcome it must be shared with others.

The same goes for the experience of happiness. We might even say that the essence of happiness is to be happy with and for others. Sharing will give a deeper resonance to our sense of happiness, just as the presence of another person adds a new dimension to our suffering.

### **Different kinds of suffering**

Suffering can appear in different forms and of varying intensity. First of all there is physical suffering, brought about by illness, injury, infection, excessive heat or cold, fatigue or insomnia. Certain forms of suffering such as the amputation of a limb, a stroke, blindness or an incurable disease, are heavy crosses to bear. Suffering can also take psychological or emotional forms: the loss of a dear one, the feeling of rejection, being frustrated in your work, humiliation and loneliness. All sorts of problems – at home, in the family, in your profession, worries about the past or concerns for the future – can cause great suffering. These cannot be measured objectively on a scale of intensity. The third form of suffering is spiritual. This is the pain of feeling abandoned, of being far from God, the source of our being: when our faith becomes insipid and uncertain, when we are aware we are sinners and death brings fear and dread.

The levels of intensity of suffering differ from person to person and can vary throughout life according to circumstances. The different forms of suffering can intermingle and influence each other. Physical suffering, for example, often entails emotional or spiritual suffering. Thus it is that people who have lost a limb also suffer emotionally. They feel isolated, turn against themselves and reproach God for having sent this terrible trial which they truly never merited.

Not everyone reacts in such a negative way to unforeseen suffering. There are some people who give us a remarkable example of acceptance and courage. I know such a one, an old man, a diabetic. He has had both his legs amputated and his sight is poor. But you should hear him speak about the war, when he was an officer – he is unstoppable once he gets going! Despite his physical handicap, his spirit is as bright as ever, and his memory a mine of information for historians. To this man, once tough and influential, all that remains is just a small room adorned with family photos, an old pocket watch in his dressing gown and a rocking chair. He has given away all his military decorations to his nephews in the unexpressed hope that perhaps they will visit him from time to time. Alas, they live far away. Despite all his trials this good man never gives up. He has fixed various goals for himself, for instance to keep his blood sugar at



the right level, and each Christmas to visit his nephews. He never complains. Full of hope and courage he has undertaken systematically to fight his illness. It is thus that he has become an example, not only to the other patients but also to their carers.

### **Searching for the meaning of suffering**

It is not easy to reflect on the meaning of suffering in general, still less to find the meaning of individual sufferings. Indeed, there is no general schema applicable to all forms of suffering. You will never understand the suffering of a man or a woman by comparing it with that of someone else; suffering has too many subjective aspects for that to be possible. To take an extreme case, a particular person may be much more affected by a heavy financial loss than by the sickness of his own child.

### **Learning to suffer**

If the way of feeling suffering is such an individual matter, it will be even more the case when it is a question of finding its meaning. To put a meaning to it depends on the psychological make-up of each individual, their age and the circumstances causing the suffering. Hence older folk tend to accept certain types of suffering more easily than young people. Someone who has suffered little or not at all in their infancy or youth will find that the trials of adult life and old age are much more difficult to bear. People without friends, who live solitary lives with no belief in God to support them, react in a totally different way from a believer or a socially involved person.

To bear suffering in a meaningful way demands a long apprenticeship from very early on in life. No one can become insensible to suffering, but someone who has done this early apprenticeship will be that much stronger to carry his cross. If we want to prepare infants and young people for real life we must not bring them up too softly by giving in to their foibles, for life can at times be very demanding.

No one can avoid life's many problems. Just as one has to learn to love, so one has also to learn to suffer. If we have learned to bear positively small adversities, that helps us to face up to greater sufferings. Disagreeable experiences can turn out to be very useful, at least if we draw lessons from them for the future.

Suffering contains an inherent contradiction. On the one hand it is necessary for becoming human, while on the other hand it is repugnant to us and we will do all we can to avoid it. However it is to be noted that the most outstanding people have often had much to suffer. In it they have found a new meaning in their life and so have been purified. Pains and sufferings provoke a state of crisis, but that crisis can be salutary, often becoming the point of departure towards a more profound and genuine humanity.

What burden of suffering is a person able to bear? In particularly trying circumstances some people show extraordinary courage: they react, they adapt. The helpful and loving presence of their nearest and dearest can certainly be wonderfully encouraging. Such strength can be surprising because we too often judge what life brings in terms of 'pains and sufferings' on one side and 'joys and pleasures' on the other. If something gives us pleasure, we find it 'good'; if something else causes us harm and demands effort, we find it 'bad'. That is simplistic and impoverishing; it is the most demanding things which give the most satisfaction, and hard winters prepare for the finest harvests. But it takes time and patience to discover this truth.

### **A step by step approach**

To come to find a hidden meaning in setbacks and sufferings is a difficult process. We pass through different stages: amazement, denial, anger and depression amongst other feelings which bubble up in us. After this first stage often comes a change of outlook and a little light appears at the end of the tunnel. Those caring for the person who is suffering can contribute to this change. A remark made at the right moment or a prayer said together can work wonders. After the darkest hours of the night a glimmer of hope appears in the midst of all the distress. It is like the very first shaft of light announcing the coming dawn. A meaning emerges, a purpose which seems realisable and becomes a source of growing energy. 'I must completely convince myself that everything in my life doesn't happen without a reason,' a young man of 35 told me when he was struck with multiple sclerosis. 'Formerly I was very popular, I liked girls a lot, also money and sports cars. Illness has changed everything in my life. God has taught me a good lesson, he has opened my eyes to the needs and joys of others. God has freed me from my pride and arrogance; I have become a better person.'

To find a meaning to suffering is a complex process; it is a combination of luck and effort. Or rather, it is the fruit of God's grace. If we want to give meaning to some painful experience, we must first of all learn to go on living and to overcome to some degree our own helplessness. Those who refuse to make this first effort will never get back on their feet again, and no one can do it for them. But if you force yourself to make it, you can count on God's help, which will probably show itself through the helpful word or gesture of another person. We must therefore personally go through the dark tunnel to meet the light. My effort and the grace of God are never in vain and in them I will find the strength to assimilate suffering positively. God's grace always produces effects both unforeseen and astonishing; it produces marvels in us. It is in fear and trembling that we discover the presence of God, as Moses did when he heard God's voice in the gentle breeze and burning bush saying: 'Take off your sandals, because the place on which you stand is holy ground.' (Exodus 3:5 )

### **Taking a personal stand**

The meaning of suffering never appears as a clear and unequivocal reply to the question: 'Why did this misfortune happen to me and not to someone else?'

A clear answer to such questions is impossible. The meaning of some particular suffering which strikes one person rather than another is not apparent without reference to the attitudes to life of the one faced by this trial. So, to find a meaning you must answer further basic questions: 'How do I react now to this suffering? What is to be done in this new circumstance?' I know a young woman who overcame the death of her child in a very positive way. She took up voluntary work in the service of handicapped people, and this proved the first step to a transformed life. Such was also the case with another woman, broken by her divorce, but who gradually gained greater self-confidence and personal responsibility to run her own life.

Does it not often happen that families which have drifted apart come together again on the occasion of a bereavement? Or the members of such a family, on the death of a friend or a near and dear one, suddenly discover how much they need each other and appreciate one another's company which up till then seemed routine? I remember an old poster which gave the message, simplistic perhaps but none the less containing a profound truth: 'If life gives you lemons, why not use them to make lemonade?' To do something with what you have received does not mean you have to ask why you received 'lemons' rather than something else. Do not keep repeating: 'Why? Why?' Do not keep moaning – it is just a waste of time.

To get something positive out of our sufferings is clearly a personal and unique task, but this painful experience can also help us to sympathise with others. This is the case with a couple who have just lost a baby and can support and comfort another couple struck by the same tragedy. Their silent caring presence can be many times more useful than all that acquaintances, family members or a priest might say. When misfortune strikes, it is often the simple silent presence which brings the most comfort. Simply to be there at the side of one who is suffering can start a healing process. And the presence of God himself can become apparent through a loving human presence. Whatever a person may have to suffer can have value and bear fruit, if not always for the sufferer, then to those who witness their suffering.

### **The way of the cross**

The Christian faith shows us its own particular way of giving meaning to suffering. Christians believe not in fate but in divine providence. They believe in effect that, provided we do all that we can, finally everything will turn out for our good. On the cross, Jesus has shown his disciples how they can bear suffering. And Paul teaches that Christians must play their part in the sufferings of Christ for the salvation of all: 'It makes me happy to suffer for you, as I am suffering now, and, in my own body to do what I can to make up all that has still to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the Church.' (Colossians 1:24)

In former times, theological works often saw suffering quite differently from how we see it now. Sorrow and suffering were never seen as a problem; they

were so evidently part and parcel of life. The Bible witnesses to suffering's universal grip on humanity; we are living in a vale of tears. And Christians are always considered strangers to this world, like persons of no fixed abode, for ever wanderers en route to their true homeland. In the course of this pilgrimage they put up with pain and hardship in the hope of reaching their Father's house.

Christians more than all others are convinced that suffering can be 'liberating'. This shows itself even at the psychological level; a long and painful interior struggle at times resolves itself into a profound peace. As we have already said, suffering can come to everybody. Why then be astonished if Christians seeking meaning in their sufferings find themselves at the foot of the cross? It is there they will find acceptance, and the conviction that one day suffering itself will be overcome.

No book has got to the bottom of suffering as effectively as the book of Job in the Old Testament. Struck by a series of misfortunes, which deprived him of all his children and all his goods, Job starts by rebelling, but little by little he calms down and focuses his attention on the insoluble mysteries of the world around him. Do not such marvels witness to the wisdom, goodness and power of God their creator? Job realises it is more important to bow down before God and humbly accept his plans than to seek answers to what is beyond human intelligence.

The meaning of suffering and of life are but two aspects of one and the same human reality. They shed light on each other. In the absence of all suffering, in the absence of all trouble or distress, we could never come to discover the profound meaning of our existence, nor could we even imagine it. And conversely, without sticking to certain values, without faith in God, without confidence in ourselves and others, we will never be capable of discovering the least meaning in the sufferings which inevitably strike us.

### **Living awaiting an answer**

Christians know God never abandons a person who is suffering. Nevertheless, to be convinced of this divine presence neither removes suffering nor explains it. The prophet Micah puts it thus: 'Though I live in darkness, Yahweh is my light' (Micah 7:8). And Job testifies: 'Who will bring back to me the months that have gone, and the days when God was my guardian, when his lamp shone over my head and his light was my guide in the darkness?' (Job 29:2-3)

Suffering is and will always remain an unfathomable enigma. This mysterious reality of suffering, however, contains latent riches, both for sufferers and for those around them, but they have to be discovered. No one suffers entirely on their own, such are the ties binding us to others. That is why our sufferings can have liberating or harmful consequences for us. Our personal suffering can be either beneficial for other people, or drive them to despair. Which it will be depends to a great extent on the attitude we adopt when faced with that

suffering. Let us remember above all that God is a God of love, concerned with the well-being and happiness of humankind. A God always near, even if we abandon him; a God who helps us to develop our personality and to improve the world in which we live. Jesus never promised us an easy life without any cross, but he did promise to stay with us through difficult times. His example and his teaching help us to find a meaning for our suffering and they give us the courage to bear our own cross. So let us cease incessantly asking ‘Why? Why?’; rather let us be attentive to the questions which suffering itself poses. May our way of accepting it be our own response. Those who come to terms with suffering in a positive way render a great service, not just to themselves but also to others; they send a light flashing out from their own darkness.

Suffering which hardens us and makes us bitter is a kind of accusation against both God and mankind, as if they were responsible for our woes. Harold Kushner, the well-known Jewish rabbi, invites us to ask the following questions:

Can you accept without resentment all the disappointments which arise from this imperfect world in which we live, from this world full of injustices, cruelties, diseases and crimes, with its earthquakes and so many other disasters? Are you able to forgive so many defects and none the less to love this world, because it also permits the blossoming of so much beauty and goodness? And because it is, after all, the only world we have? Are you able to forgive others and to love them even when they have done you harm, or even when, trapped by their limitations, they have let you down? Can you forgive them because you know no one is perfect, and that if you refuse to forgive and forget you will remain desperately alone?

Are you able to forgive God and continue to love him, even after you have discovered he is not as ‘perfect’ as you imagined him to be, just like the world he created? You are deceived because you have been abandoned; you do not understand why he allows setbacks, illness, wickedness and all that to happen to you! Can you manage even to love and to forgive him, despite all the trouble he indeed seems to have caused you? As did Job, and as you also learned to forgive your parents and to love them even if they were not always as wise, strong and as perfect as you had hoped?

If you are able to do all that, try also to recognise that that possibility to forgive and to forget are the weapons put at our disposal to enable us to live as intensely and generously as possible in a world which is far from perfect.

(Kushner 1981, 147–8)

Whatever is important, whatever is dear to us grows slowly, so time and patience are always needed to achieve something good and able to withstand the passage of time. There is a ‘kairos’, an ideal moment for everything. That is what we read of in the book of Ecclesiastes: ‘There is a time for living and a time for dying ... a time for pleasure and a time for tears ...’ (Ecclesiastes 3:2–4). We can forget that

this latter aspect is also a part of life. It takes courage and patience to discover or rediscover this. Rainer Maria Rilke writes of this:

I would beg you as much as I can to be patient in the face of all that has not been resolved in your heart. Force yourself to love your searchings themselves, each as a piece which you want to conclude like a book in a foreign language. For the time being do not seek answers which are inappropriate, because you cannot put them into practice, to live them. And precisely to live them fully. For the present, just live your questions. Perhaps, simply in living them you will finally end up imperceptibly with the answers.

(Rilke 1963, 35)

## Negative ways of ageing

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The way a person reacts to old age influences their whole attitude when they fall ill. Faced with the illnesses that ageing tends to bring, people can react in quite different ways. It tends to be negative reactions which rather often manifest themselves.

Some older people seem to want to become like children again in order to be cared for and cajoled, the centre of interest, and constantly looked after. If this interest is not forthcoming, or seems insufficient, they react with an authoritarian or aggressive stance provoked by the slightest problem or merest difficulty. Sometimes they retreat into a grumpy silence, hiding internal sentiments of rebellion and revenge. After a while these sentiments can sometimes change into an exaggerated and unbalanced generosity. For example they may try to redress the situation by an excessive gift of money.

Other older people become depressive. Gerontologists are of the opinion that depression is the most frequent illness of older people. It is believed that more than 60% of the residents in care homes suffer from depression. However, no one can help those who are depressed unless they recognise their state and accept the proposed treatment. Despite good and effective medication you cannot use it without psychological diagnosis and treatment. Depressives are certainly not suffering from dementia, though many people with dementia may also have depression. Some GPs do not seem able to distinguish between these two conditions.

As they get older, people can become suspicious. This is often the result of hearing loss. They can then arrive at suppositions without any foundation: 'I am no longer loved! They let me fall down! I don't know what is happening any more. No one ever tells me anything, my advice is no longer wanted, everything is decided without me.' Such people easily become aggressive and so provoke counter-aggression. So, one way or another, hurtful words fly around which are hard to forget or forgive.

Feelings of anxiety and guilt can also spring up and thwart the effective integration of old age and illness. Many aged folk are deeply distressed. Above all may be the fear of eventually dying of the same illness that carried off their father or mother. Older people easily see in themselves their own parents when they were old. Another common feeling is the haunting fear of not having enough money to pay the high cost of care in old age. It is a crushing state to be in despite all the saving they may have done towards their old age. Others quickly panic at every change or innovation, for example to have to live in a flat, or choose another doctor, or make new social contacts; they even dread having to change rooms in the same home and so become severely stressed. There also exists a sort of 'floating anxiety' – diffuse, vague and inexplicable – that something terrible is going to happen. In some cases this can be the harbinger of a grave illness or the approach of death. Anxious folk often react in a manner out of all proportion to what actually happens, or they can be shackled by a fixed mindset which admits of absolutely no modification. Their anxiety most often shows itself in health problems such as headaches, lack of appetite, stomach upsets or a fear of being alone.

Many older people suffer at times from feelings of guilt. They have time, especially if they are inactive or ill, to recall all the events of their past life. Very often they feel a certain guilt at the thought that they have survived so many others. This feeling shows itself in particular when they have outlived their partner of a lifetime. Why did he or she die? And must I go on living all alone? When you have plenty of time on your hands, you can easily keep turning over past events – unfortunately more often days of misfortune rather than joyful days. Feelings of guilt appear which fill you with sadness and bitterness, reinforcing your isolation. But if someone can help such people to rise above their feelings of guilt, hatred or resentment, then they will regain their peace and will be prepared to die. Their life will have been fulfilled.

I can recall an old lady who lived shut up in herself in a retirement home and shunned all contact. After visiting her repeatedly for more than a year, I eventually found out that she was tormented by a load of guilt. For twenty years she had neither seen nor spoken to her son because he had married a divorcee. After several long and emotional conversations, she finally agreed to invite her son. He came with his wife and his children. I will never forget that meeting of mother and son. They all stayed for two days and spoke endlessly of all those past years. Just a week later the old lady passed away with a smile on her face.

What is to be done? The best cure is always to let the sick person speak uninhibitedly and to lend an understanding ear to what is on their heart. The majority of sick people can thus themselves find a cure to their ills. We have simply to support them.

## **The psychology of people who are both old and sick**

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### **An end to a life marked by waiting**

Many sick people live for the most part turned in on themselves. They are preoccupied with themselves, feel rebuffed, fight the aggressive signs of their illness or, contrarily, let themselves be disheartened. These 'I' attitudes – to fight or give up – often alternate. To be ill is to know a succession of highs and lows, a lot of twists and turns. If the sick person is also elderly, they will, like other sick people, experience long times of waiting. They await the doctor, a visitor, the results of a test, to be let go. They wait for the effects of the new medication they have been prescribed, to be told what is the outcome of their treatment. Consciously or not, the sick person takes on the attitude of 'one forever waiting'. An American study has calculated that by the age of 70 an average man in good health has already passed five years of his life just waiting. Waiting seems to have become more and more typical of our life, and that despite all the inventions of modern technology. You take a plane in order to arrive quickly at your destination, yet you waste two or three hours waiting to board it!

Those who are old and sick can also see the slightest difficulty as a reminder that the end of this life is near. Their illness appears sometimes as the antechamber of death. To feel inexorably worn away and undermined by illness is a veritable nightmare. Was not Jacques Brel right to sing (in his song, 'Vieillin'), 'To die, that is nothing. To die is a beautiful affair, but, Oh, to get old ...'; and farther on, 'Hell exists only for those who delay their death with this drawn out state of decay ...' Johan Anthierens, a young Flemish writer, puts it thus:

I do not wish to get old. I have absolutely no desire to become old, and still less to reach a very advanced age. To become one of those old men facing all sorts of aches and pains, what can be more tragic? Most of us will finish up like dismembered dolls, or biological failures, delivered defenceless to the white coats, bathed in the smell of chemists, formerly so full of life and now degenerated, being a burden to all.

Such is the picture painted by Anthierens in his very own cynical style. But as Voltaire said, 'In each lie, in each exaggeration, a grain of truth lies hidden.' On the other hand, let us acknowledge that some elderly sick people are models of courtesy and kindness – more so than those in good health. Those who are sick or handicapped can witness to a radiant charity. We say 'can', because the opposite is equally true!

### **A great need for warmth and tenderness**

In 1832, while on his death-bed, the great German poet Goethe murmured 'Mehr licht' – 'I need more light.' He probably wanted someone to open the blinds of the window of his room. To be frank, Goethe was mistaken. A sick or



dying person needs human warmth, the intimacy of a loving presence, more than light. Elderly sick people are just as much human beings as someone in good health, only they express their 'being human' in different ways. This is often the case in the 'ghetto' of a care home or of a hospital. A ghetto is an environment in which all share the same fate and there is an emotional coming together. The whys and wherefores of the illness and its subsequent prognosis will always remain a question mark. All rational discussions on the subject serve merely to multiply the questions and finally leave you cold and unsatisfied. But a setting of warm cordiality enables you to discover how your old age and illness are no impediment to continue achieving the most beautiful things in your life. Yes, me, worn out and sick – can I not do some good, both for myself and for others?

### **Past, present and future meaning**

Sickness and death are omnipresent and the loss of a relative or a friend makes us face the meaning of our life. 'You must live with your eyes fixed on the future,' said Sören Kierkegaard, 'but we understand its significance only through looking at the past.' To search and discover the meaning of all we have already lived through in the past brings a kind of 'spiritual suffering'. This spiritual suffering turns us into lone searchers, men and women who do not dare to speak to others of our most intimate preoccupations and questions, and that reinforces our isolation. In any case that is what we find in our actual superficial and stressful world.

It is very important for older people to be able to make a tranquil and lucid review of their whole life and so search for the meaning of what they have or have not lived. For example I wanted to be father or mother of several lovely children, or I wanted to become a priest or religious. One must find the meaning of all that – not just the meaning of what I have achieved, of what my life actually was, but also of what my life did not become for all sorts of reasons. Often this is realised with the help of carers and some good friend. Elderly folk can thus integrate the new and very significant aspects of their sufferings and their death with that past life they have actually lived. So they can find a kind of ultimate meaning to their existence. All these partial elements of the search for meaning in the course of the different periods and circumstance of their life can thus be reassembled in a unity which gives some sense to the totality of their existence.

This convergence also gives meaning to the future. Many older people do not speak of it openly, but their thoughts and dreams often lead back to that very important aspect of human existence: what has been the meaning of life, the meaning of my joys, of my sorrows and soon of my death? That is what occupies them the most, as long as they are truly conscious of the different ways their personality and life experiences operate.

For many, but by no means all, such a systematic 'life-review' is a veritable 'catharsis', a purification. What is such a life-review? It is to re-live in some way

all the experiences of the past, and all the unsolved conflicts, to re-evaluate them. Sick people can be encouraged to relate their past, for example starting from old photos (that was me at 8, 12 or 16 years; that was my wedding day; here's our first child and he or she in turn got married). Or one could start from familiar objects: a souvenir from a honeymoon, the firm's gift on retirement. One can recall all the happiest moments, but also the misunderstandings and rows. One can try to reassess feelings of guilt, of disappointment and aggression. Sick people are helped in such a way to bring some order into all their 'unfinished business'.

## **How to care for sick older people**

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To care for someone is to be involved with them. Saying 'to care for' means that the sick person is the central figure, not the carer or visitor or the one responsible. Someone caring for a sick person who is old must build up a harmonious relationship in which that person sets the tone while the visitor or carer plays a subsidiary role. Such caring is not easy, it requires constant attention to all the ill person feels, expressly or tacitly. If you are not in tune with the sick person a disharmony quickly appears and that is no good to anyone.

Caring for such a person can be done in different ways. Do not look for any gradation or order of preference in the approaches listed below. All are equally important. They can be employed either one at a time or simultaneously. They are rather like rituals, with set forms to which one has recourse according to circumstances. Some of these approaches are advocated in the writings and conferences of Marie de Hennezel (a psychologist who has done much work in palliative care and in particular cared for François Mitterand during his final days). *L'Art de Mourir* (Hennezel and Leloup 1997) has inspired us with many ideas and rituals. Now let us name some of these rituals.

### **Taking account of what 'time' means to an elderly sick person**

For a carer or nurse 'time' represents the duration taken to do something, to finish it without delay and with the best possible result. One may not waste time because there are so many other things to do, and one has but one pair of hands and only perhaps eight hours in which to do it all. But older people who are ill experience time in quite another way. They spend it waiting for someone or something. Time is for them a limited commodity before their final departure, and they must use it with care so they can do or say all that has to be done or said.

Given this distinction between how the sick person and the carer experience time, a delicate equilibrium must be struck between them. Carers must never give the impression of being in a rush; nonetheless they must know when and how to bring a conversation to an end without interrupting the sick person who is desirous of expressing their feelings and thoughts. This at times can be very difficult and does not always meet with success. Even sick people stricken

with a degree of dementia still have a notion of time but they experience it differently than we do as we rush from one job to another. I remember a visit I made to an old lady in a retirement home. Her dementia was quite profound. When I entered she did not even open her eyes. I sat next to her, passed the time of day and asked her how she felt. Not a word in reply, no reaction whatsoever to my other questions, not even a look. After ten minutes of this silence – that’s a long time for me – I told her, ‘I must go now.’ After all, to remain sitting beside someone who utters not a single word seems interminable. Then she raised her head, looked at me and said, ‘Are you going already?’ I then understood we were living in two different worlds.

### **Catch the hidden meaning of words**

Listening is the basic attitude to the whole ritual of caring. Listening is an attitude of being available. One is available when one is there, just present with no other care, doing nothing whatsoever, but receptive to all the sick person says or suggests. That doesn’t mean we can’t say anything on our part. It is sometimes good that we speak, but our words must always come from the heart, in complete truth and sincerity. A sick person quickly senses if our words are true, if there is really a sincere exchange of thoughts. ‘To truly speak with someone is a sort of mutual acceptance’, said Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in his book *The Little Prince*. It is also important to listen to the whole content implied or hidden behind the words. Here are some examples.

- An elderly sick man, who received numerous visits, said, ‘I am always alone.’ This can mean that the visits never brought any person-to-person contact, but just chats where what was essential was always avoided.
- Another said, ‘I am allergic to all these drugs.’ This could mean, ‘The drugs given me are not what I need. I need psychological and spiritual help.’
- One further example: I came into a room and asked, ‘Where were you this morning?’ He replied, ‘I had gone away.’ I pressed further, ‘What did you do there?’ ‘Nothing.’ That is the reply of an invalid or a disabled person to someone coming from a world full of activities. Sick and fit people live in their own separate worlds! The elderly sick person feels excluded from the active world and doesn’t want anyone to intrude into his own personal world. You can find the same to be true in the relationship between parents and children; they both live in quite different worlds.

### **Do not fear to touch someone who is old and ill**

To touch someone with tenderness and respect is calming and beneficial. Each time you touch a sick person with respect and tenderness you are like the priest administering the sacrament of the sick. In the sacrament of the sick the forehead and hands are anointed with a drop of holy oil and softly rubbed into the skin. Holy Unction signifies that the invalid’s body is consecrated and

sanctified, reminding him or her that their body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. But we can also transfer the meaning of this sacramental anointing to the ordinary touches given to the sick. Each time we treat them in this way, each time our hand touches their head or we freshen their face with gentleness and respect, those are gestures very like the unctions of religious rituals.

Last week one of my good friends died of cancer. On the eve of his death he asked me to freshen up his face. When I had finished he told me, 'What a lot of good that did for me. It is just as if you had rubbed my face with creamy ointment. Thanks.' Why then do we not hope that the anointing of the sick be given by the priest with all the attention that nurses give when they treat the sensitive parts of the body of the sick? If our nurses and carers do this so conscientiously with gentleness, respect and tenderness, does not their very comportment acquire a sort of sanctifying dimension? I once heard of how a night-nurse, having wished all her patients 'Good night', played some soft Gregorian music while she tenderly wiped their faces. This took a good five minutes, then before leaving she put her hands on their foreheads as a sign of blessing; just as our grandmothers may have done to us, with a wee sign of the cross before going to sleep. Those patients felt really good after that. Jesus also laid his hands on the sick to lighten their sufferings and heal them. Such a gesture has a sacred dimension and it is something everyone can do, but it must be done with love and respect. Priests can teach nurses how to touch a patient with sweetness and tenderness when administering the anointing of the sick.

### **Invite older sick people to participate**

When you share something with others you are no longer isolated. People feel stronger and better when they are no longer alone. Being close to another brings the benefit of mutual support. This is particularly true of Christians who believe that the Eucharist unites them to the divine life of Christ. Their soul receives both strength and nourishment. Receiving the Eucharist is undoubtedly a strong and beneficial moment of intimacy for older sick people.

But can we do anything for non-Christians or those who are far from any Christian tradition? Can they not also participate in a sort of communion, a ritual which comforts them and gives them that human warmth which comes from a united group and which at the same time rises to a dimension beyond that of a simple encounter? I am thinking, for example, of coming together to drink a good glass of wine, or share some delicacy. This is not just a matter of eating or drinking together without paying much attention to the act, but rather is made into a sort of communion, and thus becomes a true ritual not lacking sacredness when it is carried out with respect and mutual love. On such an occasion words well up from the heart, words of thanks, of love and of tenderness surpassing the merely human level, giving strength and softening the feeling of loneliness. I experienced one such moment with all the team of palliative carers when we gathered around the bed of an elderly non-Christian, a terminal case, cracking open a bottle of good champagne. At that moment,

this old man gave us the most heartfelt ‘Thank you’ I have ever heard in my life. It was indeed a sort of communion, transcending ordinary human relations and creating a profound bond between all of us.

### **Remember that compassion means ‘suffering with’**

For many of us someone who is sick is an unknown person with whom we may progressively become acquainted. This is true even if we have already known them for a long time. We have compassion for them and wish to help them. According to the dictionary, compassion is the sentiment of pity making us aware of the sufferings of another. Those who share in the sufferings of others are compassionate. But it can also mean participating in the sufferings of others from the inside, in depth. The Latin root of ‘compassion’ is two-fold: ‘pati’ = to suffer; ‘cum’ = with. So then to show compassion means to suffer with the sick person in all sincerity, all the while trying to make him or her feel better. In fact, that corresponds with what Jesus wished for us in our sufferings. Jesus never told us, ‘If you wish to become my disciple, I will keep you free from all suffering.’ He told us, ‘In all your difficulties and suffering, I will be with you, I will be your companion and you will never be alone. I will suffer with you.’ As Christians we must imitate Jesus and never abandon sick people to their solitude.

We must be at their side and suffer with them for – sick or well – we often remain defenceless before suffering in all its forms. In showing ourselves compassionate we can soothe the sufferings of a sick person, for it is precisely their solitude we alleviate. We do not just reduce their loneliness, we make it a bit more bearable. Here is a practical way to do that: each time we visit a sick person, let us try to put ourselves in their place, or imagine them to be our father or mother, brother, sister or friend. That is the best way to create an emotional link between them and ourselves, a link which can be lived in a very personal way and which cannot but benefit the sick person.

### **Help older people who are ill to seek contact with an invisible presence**

It is quite normal that those who have to face incomprehensible and crushing events such as sickness and death should take refuge in the ‘wholly other’ – what lies beyond the natural and visible. I have the feeling that many who are gravely ill make an appeal to something or someone greater than themselves and beyond the medical world. That is how we pray to God, or invoke the Blessed Virgin, a dead friend or family member, an angel or a saint. These elderly sick persons do not always talk about it because it is their intimate secret. They wish in some way to give another dimension to their illness, to transfer it to a milieu beyond the rest of life. They realise all the scientific and medical means can no longer help them, and that is why they search for something greater than themselves or our world.

I can say that a good number of sick people, who are closed to all religious observance and have not put their foot inside a church for years, nonetheless

retain a sense of an invisible reality, able to protect and help them. And that can give them a kind of peace and hope. I can remember in particular a dying elderly non-Christian who was persuaded that his guardian angel still continued to help and protect him. He invoked it and hoped to see it in the 'beyond'. When we care for sick older people we can sometimes sensitively help them to seek contact with an invisible presence such as a dead spouse or friend, a saint or an angel, the Blessed Virgin, Jesus Christ or God the Father, who loves us. Let us do that along with them if we think it will be difficult for them to do it on their own.

## **Conclusion**

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Taking care of an elderly sick person also involves taking care of yourself and your fellow-carers. Those at the bedside of a sick or dying person also need help and comfort. Taking care of the carers is a very important element in our caring for elderly people, and this is not always sufficiently taken into account.

Those who care for the sick are also people with limitations. They must learn to distance themselves at a given moment, for rest and relaxation. What is more, it is preferable to commit the care of a sick person to a team. Each member of the team should be attentive to the other members. The care of elderly patients with all it entails cannot be the task of a sole individual. To really care and be with them right up to their death demands nothing less than an attitude of mutual support at the heart of a team, and the help of the Spirit of the love of God.

By your loving care you help God himself become the good and caring God for these elderly and suffering people.

## **Coda**

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### **The parable of the oak**

Look at him cut down lying at full length, this majestic old oak tree which had seemed to defy the centuries. He waits. Already all his branches have been cut off. What magnificent wood! And the Lord, casting a dreamy look over him, said, 'Tell me, you strong trunk, what would you like me to let people make out of you?'

After a moment of silence the old oak tree replied, 'A door! Then people will have to pass through me to get to you. An open door! ... or perhaps a window ... a window through which people could look at length to you. They could then see you at work and learn to know you better from the inside and so understand you. A window with beautiful panes, brilliant and transparent.'

The Lord listened to all this with interest. 'Or perhaps a table would be preferable! A beautiful table around which people could sit near to you. You could welcome them with kindness and you could give yourself to them in your love ...'

‘Perhaps I am asking too much ... Maybe a rustic bench somewhere under the trees. And seeing it weary pilgrims would rest themselves for a moment near to you’.

Another silent pause ... the tree waited. The Lord followed the drift of his thoughts ... What a magnificent trunk!

And again the Lord spoke: ‘Yes, your suggestions are really good: a door, a window, a table, a bench; all these are necessary and are very beautiful pieces of furniture ... And yet if you really want what is best for people, do you know what I suggest for you?’

The old oak held his breath, the better to hear. ‘You know, my dear old oak, this is going to be difficult, but there is something even more beautiful. Let me turn you into ordinary firewood. Let me cut you into pieces and sell you as logs ready for the fire. Then you will give people the warmth and the light they have such great need of. I know I am asking a lot of you. For a while you are giving people your bright flame and finally warmth, and you will be progressively transformed into a sort of grey ash where a few sparks still glow. And when you have done all that and become dust, a breath of wind will blow you away.’

‘To be a door, a window, a table, or a bench means a lot to people and also to yourself. You would be something and that would be a great consolation to you. But the fire which entirely consumes you turns you into something even better for others.’

‘Well ... ’ The silence was even deeper than before.

(Author unknown)

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