



complete, in that the loving care they gave to the tribe during their lives, was now being given to them in their latter days. It was an integrated life.

History reveals great civilizations in the past arose from a religious or moral inspiration, then blossomed, plateaued and ultimately disintegrated.

Dorothy Buckland-Fuller in Ann Deveson's fascinating book *Coming of Age*, says 'I think that if each one of us does not put our little stone to the monument that we want to call civilization, there will be no civilization'.<sup>[1]</sup>

(Dorothy Buckland-Fuller has had a lifetime involvement with ethnic communities, and has served on the Ethnic Affairs Commission, she is also a member of the NSW Consumer Forum for the Aged).

That was how tribal and family life evolved - seemingly until today. Advance in medical knowledge has expanded the number of years regarded as man's allotted span. So today, I see the three ages roughly taking up about eighty years - child and youth about twenty, adulthood approximately forty and old age twenty years.

Our school education today has extended its curriculum and the young are exposed to a wide variety of subjects. Sports, art, music and other cultural activities are made available, and an affluent society encourages youths' participation.

This is today's equivalent of tribal education, except that two interrelated subjects for the most part are missing. They are religion and the social mores that the religion or philosophy created, which, in turn supported the coherence of the tribe.

On the whole, today's youth do not appear to enjoy that strong support. In other words, the cohesiveness of the tribal or family way of life is being ousted in favour of 'individualism' per se. Youth is being constantly exposed to the many vicissitudes of living in the late twentieth century.

To a large extent adult economic greed uses youth as a lucrative source for exploitation. The striving to look young, whilst seeking the external pleasures of youth, has become the main aim of many people's lives. So large number of young people have been brought up to see themselves in a distorted way - as unimportant, and lacking in significance for society as a whole.

With all the wonderful advantages today that youth have available, one

would expect that youth presenting for initiation into the adult world would be happily expectant. But many are not. Many young people today appear confused and certainly not happy. Australia has the highest rate of youth suicide in the world. Why?

In the second age in today's world, we find men and women from roughly 20 to 60 years of age, working extremely hard. This work supports a large proportion of youth, and to some extent, the aged. The stress of responsibility on this group is great.

We hear that to find a new job after age 40, is difficult, for we are programmed to think youthfully. While 20-40 years is acceptable, after 40 - well, you are 'getting on'.

Valuable experience is not always taken into consideration.

We hear of men and women with 'burn out' at fifty-five and sixty to sixty-five is the normal age of retirement. However, I do not propose to discuss the question of the age of retirement, beyond noting that maybe our economic system today requires that the aged 'move out' to make room for the younger person. Such an idea appears economically feasible.

Betty Friedan says in "The Fountain of Age" "The old and the young need each other. We're opposed to the segregation of older people out of society.

Older people have so much to give to society, it's wrong to sell them places, just to play, to keep them out of the way'.[2]

And Dorothy Buckland-Fuller notes that: "There should be an older person and a younger person on every job; one job could be quite well shared between two, sometimes three people'.[3]

But that also becomes an economic problem and not for consideration in this paper.

Many of these retired older people form the backbone of necessary voluntary charitable work. Such charitable organisations are built into the fabric of existence in today's world. However, it is interesting to note that once one has retired from a paid job, there is a diminution of respect for such new work. Of course, this is not exclusive to older people. Mothers or home-carers have complained for years at the

non-recognition of the value of their unpaid labour.

Does that mean money is the standard by which we evaluate life? I do know that without voluntary work, many institutions would have to close.

Betty Friedan states 'Just as darkness is sometimes defined as the absence of light, so age is defined as the absence of youth. Age is assessed not by what it is, but by what it is not'.<sup>[4]</sup>

Anne Deveson in the foreword in the magazine *Your Retirement* comments on this statement by saying 'Age should not always be measured against youth, as if youth was the norm and age some kind of social disease'.<sup>[5]</sup>

The nuclear family is a comparative newcomer in the social structure. Everything to do with living today, in the western world certainly, is predicted on the nuclear family concept. Our dwelling places are separate units or houses, designed for two young adults and temporary provision for two children. Some children want freedom to express their 'individualism' by moving out from parental care from age 10 years onwards - some living on the streets. Why?

Governments plan dwellings, roads, amenities, etc. based on the needs of a nuclear family. We are really people 'living in little boxes'. These little boxes are inhabited by stages one and two. Stage three, the aged group live somewhere else. They live in smaller little boxes or, when too frail, in nursing homes. And it appears this system is spreading. Recently, a friend was congratulating a Beijing resident on the extended family care practised by Chinese people in relation to their aged. She was told that was still so in the main, but, that in say twenty years, they too, will probably have nursing homes for the aged.

But we in the western world now fare very well compared with other countries. Elizabeth Obadina, a freelance writer and journalist living in Lagos writes, 'Elderly people without a family or savings or too frail to work, often face a life on the streets. In Lagos, a city of six million people, there are two old people's homes. They provide just 37 places to strictly destitute elderly. Nationally, there are 13 homes

servicing Nigeria's population of 95 million'.<sup>[6]</sup>

Nursing homes are no longer as accessible as they were. There is a very real thrust now to keep the old in their own homes. It is less of a drain on the economy.

But this means more community assistance is needed and family carers are often forced into actual '24 hours a day, seven days a week' servitude to the sick aged.

But as a realist, it is hard to see the possibility of changing this concept of the nuclear family in the near future. Where does this leave the third stage older people? We accept them as baby minders and as voluntary unpaid workers. But what happens when their physical powers begin to slow down and they no longer are able to cope with these tasks or with any social activities? If they are 70 plus, they may still have another ten to twenty years to live.

I think it is time we examined this latter part of the ageing stage. Much is written about, and much is done regarding the physical mechanics of staying alive, but not so much regarding the 'feeling' process. To really know what it feels like to be old, you have to be old.

When anything goes wrong with a person whether old or young, we still think in terms of the old system. We still, in spite of our own individualism and over-complex bureaucratic society, say, when all else fails 'call the family'. It is useful for society to have a category to which it can pass the responsibility. This happens in the case of old people.

Yet, one thing all old people fear the most, is being a burden to their children. The fact that once the children were babies and, at the time were a burden lovingly accepted, is not remembered by old people. They usually only want good and pleasurable things for their children and grandchildren.

Health problems and often, the accompanying pain are unpredictable and have to be coped with when the time comes. But there are other things which could be changed prior to this, and to everyone's advantage.

As their physical powers decrease, their usefulness to society lessens. Their outside interests become too enervating and it is now that they really desperately

need to feel they still have a place in family life. They need to feel of some small use in the world and they need to love and assurance.

I mentioned in the beginning that religion is missing from many children's education. Yet our western civilization, through Judaism and Christianity, was built on religious values, one of which was 'Honour your father and mother'. All other world religions have similar values.

For those of religious bent the religious scriptures have not changed. Today's newest and fast growing world religion - the Bahá'í Faith - upholds the love and respect due to parents. It also includes in its administrative system roles for both adults and the older generation. Elections for example are conducted by secret ballot and there is no material gain. All are eligible for election to administration bodies. Those elected are there to serve their community and humanity in general, for that year.

Whenever the religions include the old, there is integration in that sphere.

But in the secular world, computers, books and all the new technology now store some - only some - of the knowledge formerly retained in the memories of the old men and women. So respect for the aged has diminished.

These days in the upbringing of children, much emphasis is placed on not just giving loving care as was done by the past generations, but now verbalisation of the love is necessary as well. You frequently hear the words 'Mummy and daddy love you so much'. Such affirmations, along with hugging and touching, are universally accepted as being important for the well being and development of the child. May I suggest that old people too would benefit immeasurably from having loving words and occasional hugs from loving adult children and grandchildren.

The emotional desert in which most older people languish is not necessary. I think it comes from ignorance imposed by a frenetically busy world, but some of the blame for the lack of support lies with some of the old people themselves.

They often endure this loneliness and say nothing; ask nothing. They make excuses for their adult children by recognising the extreme busyness of

today's world. The following points expand on this theme.

Firstly, the fact that the adult children do not understand their parent's needs may in part be because they are not 'old' themselves and don't truly understand.

Secondly, a potent factor is fear. Old people feel inferior in education to their children and of course, they are in a comparatively powerless position.

They are afraid if they speak out they may risk losing the loving things that do come their way. Better to stay silent than risk losing all.

Thirdly, one fear that older people have was expressed by Noreen Hewett in 'Coming of Age'. 'A lot of older people, me included, wouldn't like to have a heart attack and be left lying around for a week or so.'<sup>[7]</sup> This is a real problem and needs to be discussed.

Fourthly, for some older people pride leads to a reluctance to admit to the world that one's children are not supremely loving to their parents.

Fifthly, there is an inbuilt loyalty to protect their adult children and grandchildren by covering up their failure to give support.

Sixth and lastly, traditionally it has not been acceptable that one steps outside the family to discuss such things. These things are endured as part of growing old. I think the same attitudes in the past used to be held regarding domestic violence and incest. Now such subjects are openly discussed. Why not discuss the emotional needs of the elderly?

Should you be thinking why am I not fearful of expressing these facts, I can say it is because I have already spoken of them and because I trust my children's integrity. They would accord me the right to express my views. Everyone has rights these days, so why not the 'oldies' emotional rights? Also, I know many of the things I speak of they recognise and practise already.

Quite a number of years ago, when I was thanking my adult child and spouse for including me in some family activity, it was said, 'Well, we realise we will be old one day and if we don't practise family involvement now, how can we expect our children to give such involvement to us in our old age.'

What can be done? Firstly, families should consult and discuss with their adult children, maybe with grandchildren too, their needs and their problems. There will be new knowledge exposed of which the younger people are unaware. Physical needs have to be sorted out.

The emotional needs are not so easy to define. I have already mentioned the need for verbal expressions of love and for hugs. Phone calls, visits, tapes, letters are all ways of saying 'we still care'. Including the grandparents in family activities is comparatively easy if it takes in the family routine, e.g. 'We are taking the children for a tennis lesson, would you like to come and watch?' It is not a big deal but it is enriching for all three age groups.

I come finally to an old idea in a new guise, which really encapsulates all the suggestions. It is 'extended-family-thinking'. I am suggesting we consider and practise deliberate "Extended Family Thinking". An explanation follows.

With extended family thinking built in to each present day nuclear family right from the early days of childhood, the emotional needs of the aged would be woven into the fabric of everyday life. It is not a difficult concept. It is not a change of direction of one's love and care. It is simply a deliberate extension of family thinking. It can be done.

To have a unified family approach there is a need for family consultation at the beginning. It needs to be done now, possibly before you even have an aged person in your family. But you will be preparing for what will happen. Your parents, grandparents and you, yourself will get old.

In discussing extended family thinking we appear to be referring solely to blood relationships, but close family friends and distant but loved relatives can and do play important roles in the extended family concept.

If we do commence "Extended Family Thinking", then the problems relating to the respect, value and love of the older generation will be greatly diminished.

Whether we have practising religious beliefs or not, the emotional

welfare as well as the physical welfare of older people is essential if we are to re-create a truly integrated life span for humanity.

So, may I again ask you to consider, and practise "Extended Family Thinking" and then we will have the integration of the three ages of man.

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### Notes

1. Dorothy Buckland-Fuller, in Anne Deveson, *Coming of Age*, Scribe Publications, Newham Australia, 1994, p.120.
2. Betty Friedan, *The Fountain of Age*, Vintage, London, 1994, p.166.
3. Dorothy Buckland-Fuller, *op. cit.*, p.122.
4. Betty Friedan, *op. cit.*, p.68.
5. Anne Deveson, in magazine *Your Retirement*, National Publishing Group, Sydney, 1995, p.4.
6. Elizabeth Obadina, 'Bosom of the Family', in *The New Internationalist* No. 264, New Internationalist Publications Australia, Feb. 1995, p.16.
7. Noreen Hewett, in Anne Deveson, *Coming of Age*, Scribe Publications, Newham, Australia, 1994, p.256.

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