

An Edited Transcript Of

"The Myth of Public Concern:
Will it be Safe to be Old in the Twenty-First Century?"

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The question of whether people are going to be safe a couple of decades from now, or even next week, is an important one. I would not want to make the claim that I have the definitive idea about who is eventually going to be safe and who isn't. This won't be a lesson in prophecy that will reveal to you what's going to happen for sure in twenty years. What I'd like to do is to be a little bit more cautious and raise some scenarios that aren't particularly nice to think about, but which are at least theoretical possibilities. Given the ability of human beings to predict the future, it probably would not be very smart to take too many stabs at concrete predictions. I think, in the back of my mind, about eastern Europe and how that had not been predicted by virtually anyone and how few were far-seeing about the events that went on there. Eastern Europe should at least remind us that when we're predicting or guessing about the future, there is this massive element of fallibility.

In terms of whether being old is going to be a good situation to be in twenty or thirty years from now, I would like to deal with it as a sort of rhetorical question or as a possibility of being something. That may not necessarily be all that attractive or desirable. I raise this spectre not because I am a particularly pessimistic or depressing person, but because asking these kinds of troubling questions is a way of being responsible. To not ask questions about the genuine social security of people is to ignore potential dangers and dangers that we could have prepared for had we taken them seriously. Our history is full of examples of not taking certain realities seriously, only to have them descend upon us when we are not ready for them.

What promoted my thinking on that has been a lot of contact with some of the most devalued and abandoned elderly people in our society. It isn't possible for me to say now that to be old this universally is a safe kind of situation. In fact there are lots of older people who are not in good shape at all, socially and economically, in our society. Whether or not that phenomena continues into the future seems to me to be a reasonable question given that in the present certainly some elderly citizens in our society that aren't in terrific shape, not just in their physical situation but also in their social and political situation. I see at least the reasonableness of the question, "Is it possible that some of these conditions could persist into the future and perhaps even get worse?"

Another thing that promoted my thinking on this was a little brochure from the American Association of Retired Persons on domestic mistreatment of the elderly. It's a little "do's and don't's" about preventing domestic mistreatment of elderly people. I wonder about us when we have to produce brochures like that. Why is it that we even need to worry about this question? What is it

in people and in society that you end up having a national advocacy group for elderly citizens, in a country very close to us, having to produce a whole set of publications on defending people in the very society that they helped create? One way to look at this is simply to see this as incidental, chaotic, random anomalies of mistreatment; for instance, passive neglect or psychological abuse or material/financial abuse or active neglect, etc. We could just say that these things are unpatterned. They are "flukes" because of some nasty person somewhere who does something nasty to another person. That would be a really nice, individualistic answer to the problem of elderly peoples' safety, because you could answer, "Yes, elderly people are safe providing that the majority of people behave themselves." But, one could also take up the further question of, "Are there social conditions, societies, circumstances that tend to bring out the worst in people so that people who are old become less safe?" Is it possible, for instance, that there are certain criteria that could be established so that a particular society could be safer than another -- a society that would in fact tend to show greater concern for elderly citizens or any other citizens? It is a very important question because without some sense of what constitutes social security and where it comes from, then one can't plan for it, risk for it, sacrifice for it and, certainly, one can't avoid the things that contribute to the insecurity or the devaluation of the old or of any other particular group in the society.

There are abuses of human beings that do become institutionalized. They become routinized and so frequent that they become a pattern of living or a part of the process of living that becomes "normative" -- something that happens with great regularity. These problems can often persist in societies for very long periods of time, virtually unchanged even though some people are suffering from them. Slavery and racism are two examples. It's a very tough thing to root out. When one legislates against or has successive reform movements against racism, for example, it still shows itself up in the next generation, just when you thought you'd had enough of it. So, there is something in this question that is not trivial. It is a fact that human beings do descend into periods of abuse in their society. It is conceivable that the next century may be a wonderful century, and I hope it will be. Yet, I think it would still be prudent now to wonder aloud "what if it isn't" and what things are leading towards it that we ought now to struggle against.

I am going to try to identify some sample worrisome features, just to give you a flavor for some of the things that I think are of concern in the current situation. I would also like to identify some possible counterbalancing activities, the majority of which other speakers have already identified. I am sorry that I could not be more original, but I do feel some relief that other people would probably do the same thing that I would recommend. I will also caution against some conventional remedies to the issue of

social insecurity or abuse, and generally, want to put the issue on the table about what might be at stake or involved in trying to generate a real safe century for elderly citizens.

I did label this the "myth of public concern" because much of public policy-making is sort of predicated on the idea that basically everybody is trying to do their best and that human beings, given enough time, will sort anything out. One of the assumptions built into many plans or prospects for the future is that, in fact, there is lots of public concern. It is not somehow subject to the laws of scarcity. There will always be plenty of it, like money. But, in fact, scarcity of public concern has been real problem in our society at different times and probably will be in the future. One should think of concern for other people as something that is, if not certainly precious, at least something we should not squander. It may well be something we may not have enough of when it really matters. So, the idea that there is a concerned society out there just waiting to do the right thing and that it is now vigilantly planning to do the right thing in the future, may not be the best way to look at our society going into this next century. Such an optimistic idea about communities and society may conceal the fact that many people simply may not want to deal with the possibility of unpleasantness and that people often don't have the right or best ideology about human beings and humanity. Moreover, many will resist any evidence that their hoped-for, prettier, better world won't come. This might be people who believe too much in progress. That virtually every day is somehow inevitably better than the preceding, and that it's going to go on like that -- getting better and better and better. That things must always get better. The fact that we have had an immensely awkward time of it in this century may not in the least discourage that view. Equally, there are people who really want to have a great belief in the things that the society tells itself about how good it is -- so much so that they would cling to those ideas, even in the fact of contrary evidence. For instance, in Canada we certainly cling to the idea that we are rather superior lot, particularly in reference to the people south of the border who could well afford to be more like us. But, perhaps, in fact, in our Canada, all Canadians aren't quite so superior, so caring, so wonderful as we would like to think of ourselves. Maybe, in fact, Canadians too have their drawbacks as a people or as individuals. There are other people who don't want to deal with these kinds of scenarios because they may not believe that there really are problems, particularly unsolvable ones that will persist. In effect, that basically we have had some sort of technological or moral break-through in the latter part of the 20th century that has put the human condition behind us. There may be people here who feel that somehow a laboratory will come up with a response to peoples' needs that will put all of this squabbling about values, priorities, morality and ethics behind us.

I don't believe any of those things. I think that the

constancy of concern for other people is something that can't be counted on. Societies that take care of this issue are going to be societies that are safer. Societies that take seriously their own limitations in terms of concern for each other are societies are ready to face what they are going to be like. They have already accepted that there are going to be a lot of people who aren't getting what they need, that there will be difficulties, and that one needs to be ready for those difficulties when they come. Certainly, if you look around our society, there are lots of people for whom there isn't sufficient concern. For instance, child abuse has a history of the waxing and waning of public concern about essentially unwanted, unpopular, "unneeded," and perhaps even costly children in our society. Also, there has been much interest in the homeless, but the numbers of homeless people certainly aren't what you would call retreating. Racial and ethnic minorities wouldn't claim that they are in a reasonable and secure position. Those who are being abused in terms of violence in the home -- it may be battered women, children, elderly people, disabled persons and the ill -- all reveal to us limitations on the amount of public concern available for any given group or people or problem. Concern isn't something that we have an abundance of and, in fact, we live through periods where there doesn't seem to be, if anything, enough of it.

However, concern for other people is elastic. It can stretch and seem to be plentiful, or at times there doesn't seem to be any of it, just when you need it the most. This variance reflects what people feel are urgent or not urgent issues and can be a very fickle kind of thing. Many people who have worked at very good causes for many years can tell you that there were periods when the cause was a very popular one, only to have gone for ten, fifteen or twenty years unable to get a hearing on a particular issue. So, it is interesting to see how elastic concern is and how "fickle" it is.

Because of that, many people might wait a long time to have their issues taken seriously. The issues of the native people in Canada and their frustrations, which haven't received serious inclusion in the whole debate about the future of the country, are just one example of a group that has been saying this for some time and still doesn't feel that it is being taken seriously as a part of the social equation.

Socially devalued groups are generally groups that exist in a society but don't reflect or enjoy what the society values. All societies create and have these groups, but not all societies create conditions that are as extreme as each other. So it is quite possible for people to be not particularly valued in a given society yet not have to pay as high a price for that as they might in another society. Whereas, in the next society, that very same person would find that he/she would pay an enormous for being different in some way. If you consider Europe at the time of the

Second World War, it was a brutal period in terms of how Jews were treated in one country and the next. Even though all countries had evidence of anti-Semitism, the conditions varied considerably from country to country, and so did the consequences. It wasn't just because of physical distances, but also cultural and social differences in history that created a condition where people were either safe or less safe.

There are indicators that could indicate that people aren't safe. I will describe some of these indicators that in a particular society or community puts one at risk, in terms of getting what you need as a human beings. They are simple things. For instance, if one is put into a low status, where one does not have much value or valued roles, where one is a person of little importance to anyone else, then that person is at very high risk of getting what he or she needs. People's interest in you will follow the value of the role that is conferred upon you. If you don't have very many roles, or if the ones that you are in is considered to be a lower one, you won't get top of the line treatment. When you find elderly people in our society in that situation where they are not considered important persons, where they are essentially worth less somehow when compared to other groups, then predictably, that group will be vulnerable to mistreatment. They are of low value. That is in fact how they are regarded and will be treated. It is a very fundamental thing. There will be a correlation between how one is regarded and how one is treated.

The second thing is whether there are images of you that are positive in the larger community. In other words, if people can't "grasp" you in positive terms, if there are not positive social stereotypes about you as a person or group, then there will not be correspondent good treatment of you. It is a logical inevitability. So, when you see images that are largely focussing on the negative parts of being a particular group, person, or types of person, then that should be a worrisome indicator that the person is going to be treated as if they are largely a negative influence or presence.

The third factor would be whether people are included. If people are avoided, rejected, segregated, kept apart, not included in the large stream of life in the heart of community but are put aside, then chances are very high that a sort of second or third class citizenship will follow. Whether that means that you are put into a special reservation or place of segregation, put away or shut away -- and there are many names for these like human service programs, reservations, just the "other side of the track" or "job ghettos" or other places reserved for people of low value. When that happens and it is institutionalized, and when you have a pattern of people being pushed aside, put away and not included, then that is a very serious indicator that a major social decision has been made, whether people admit to it or not.

The fourth would be where the group really does have very little autonomy, freedom, control, are powerless, or voiceless. These are all signs really that the group may not be utterly devalued but it certainly is in jeopardy. Where groups do not have people to speak for them: where the people who speak for them are not being taken seriously: particularly where their freedoms are taken away from them and where there are no guarantees that their rights will be considered equal to those of other people -- these are all signs that such people are not going to have an easy time of it.

In fact, in many communities people have been declared as essentially "not human" as a precursor to their ill treatment. They needed to be thought of as less than human or not human or certainly not subject to the same laws as other people. Therefore, it became possible to treat them differently because they weren't really like "us".

Fifth is, simply, poverty. Where you see evidence of widespread poverty that is patterned by the general circumstance rather than by the wish of the individual. That generally is a resource allocation decision made collectively by the community. It's a pattern where the poor stay poor and others don't. Poverty always has been a hard way of life and has always meant deprivation. It is always, no matter what study we speak of, a precursor to other misfortunes, whether it is in terms of health, longevity, or any other number of things. Poverty is not what you'd call the starting point in terms of an outstanding lifestyle.

Related to this is the sixth point, which is systematic underdevelopment. Whether that is the fact that certain minority groups do not go on to university, or certain groups don't get certain jobs, or certain people don't get certain experiences once they reach a certain age. These are signs that the process of being human, of growing and developing, has ceased or been prevented, is suppressed or repressed. We see a lot of lives wasted when they could have had a lot of potential but it never got developed. This is a very strong indicator that relative to the society these people are in jeopardy.

The seventh point I mentioned earlier. When you begin to see patterns of non-random neglect, violence, abuse or brutalization of people this is a worrisome trend. Particularly when it is not accidental or hit-or-miss, but a pattern of hurting, mistreatment and abuse. That is when people are, in fact, a group which society may intensely dislike and will eventually act that out.

Finally, a group will be in jeopardy if the society or community is unconscious or unappreciative of its effect on this group or when it has very little awareness of what the pattern of things is actually doing to people. Also where there may be public denial about the endangerment or the devaluation of that group.

Certainly, if a society mistreats people it is going to tell itself that it isn't. You do not find a lot of dominant South Africans all that persuaded that there is anything wrong going on there. The Europeans who took over here on this continent and colonized it did not have a real strong sense of anything that might be considered by other people as any kind of error in judgment. They had a tremendous sense that what they were doing was right and virtuous. The community or society who thinks they are absolutely right and absolutely have God on their side and don't take account of the suffering of other people, is just not going to address its inequities. It will not deal with whatever claim of social equity is authentically there.

I raise these criteria as a way of focussing my concerns about elderly people, to introduce certain terms with which we can look at the situation of the elderly. My impression about social images, without claiming to have made lots of surveys on this but simply as an observer, is that one would not have to look too long or too far to find a shortage of really positive, glamorous images of elderly citizens. They do exist, but they are remarkable in their rarity rather than in their routineness. This is a very worrisome thing. How are we to rise to a wonderful potential in terms of the elderly when we do not have images of that potential given to us throughout our daily lives, day in, year in, across the span of our lives? These things do not simply come out of nowhere.

One of the few places in which I see constantly positive images is largely in publications produced by groups that are essentially very closely allied with the elderly themselves. For instance, the American Association for Retired Persons magazine is full of very interesting people in their advertisements for various products. These are elderly people portrayed in highly glamorous, interesting, positive ways. I just don't see that in the larger set of images that I get from the media. I also see in myself and among my friends and others a tendency to come up with essentially rather worn and old stereotypes about elderly people. They still exist and do not go away, even though they have been declared politically incorrect. Nonetheless, they continue to haunt the back of people's minds and even elderly people themselves will reflect on those same images. Many elderly people even agree with them. These negative images have not gone away, even though one would hope that they would.

Also, if you look at certain groups that are elderly -- for example, elderly and disabled or ill -- the elderly are, in fact, being loaded down with all of the images that the disabled have to fight against that are negative. So if one is both elderly and disabled, or elderly and ill, then he or she has additional stigma. These are not positive images.

These images constitute one of the signs of something that is amiss that is going to have to be addressed if we are to have a

better century. If they persist and seem to show great longevity, then a generation or two is not really very much time. The images of the disabled, for instance, in terms of what they are capable of, have been around for many centuries. They are working very hard to get rid of them. In fact, a generation of effort is really very little effort when you consider the longevity of those images. So, even the year 2031 doesn't seem very far away when you consider how long it takes to destroy unconscious stereotypes.

The second is the whole status and range of valued roles offered elderly people in the society. Even the casual observer will see that there is a constriction on those roles and a tendency to stream people out of these valued roles rather than into them. Notwithstanding the many commendable exceptions to this, the broader tendency seems not to be the expansion of positive roles for elderly people, but rather a struggle to hold on to the few still available to them. Therefore, I see a situation which, when projected into the future, could mean that people literally are unable to participate because the roles to participate in are not considered appropriate, interesting or relevant for elderly people. This is not to say that there is no evidence of a countertrend. Yet, countertrend has not won over the negative-trend. Countertrends are always encouraging, but not persuasive as evidence that the problem has been solved.

These roles are not being forfeited voluntarily. So, another sign is the involuntary surrender of these roles. There is the sort of unstated social pressure that at a certain age you should forfeit these roles. This is a kind of day-by-day coaching into the oblivion of having a very few roles to the point where we now have a suicide rate for elderly people that is substantially higher than for many other groups. Those two phenomena are not unrelated. If you have nothing left to live for, you will think of suicide in more positive terms.

Third, going back to the avoidance or segregation of elderly people, and notwithstanding the many commendable attempts to keep the level of social integration of the elderly in the society, there is tremendous pressure both to have elderly people segregated and congregated. Segregated means being kept separate in an existence from other generations, but also congregated with other elderly people, as if there is somehow a sort of biological-genetic attraction between elderly people. It is as if there is a preference for one another's company over that of others. The idea is, again, a patterned sequestering of the elderly, whether externally imposed or self-imposed. This is not just a separation of the generations but also the segregation in lifestyles, residential segregation, and segregation in leisure activities. Also, in many cases, there is the actual avoidance of elderly people as companions or friends or as people to be included. There are many elderly people who have been "abandoned" insofar as being thought of as "interesting" people for their society, people who do

not have visitors or friends. This is a state of social disinterest. Whether it happens with one, two or three is immaterial as to whether it does regularly happen some of the time.

The fourth factor is the loss of autonomy, power, control and influence. I often hear stories that elderly people aren't any longer in charge of their own lives as they become more dependent. I think that the tremendous fear people have of loss of control and loss of autonomy is a very, very strong indicator that there could potentially be something wrong. When half of the population of elderly people are terrified that they will lose control over their lives, this is not something to be thought of as a trivial concern. It reflects, if not reality, then certainly an apprehension that there could be some cause for concern that "I won't be the master of my own destiny." If you look at people who have been institutionalized who are elderly, this is not something that they are imagining. They know absolutely that this is not a jump into a magnificent arena of personal choice. This is a jump into a lifestyle that is, in fact, substantially restrictive.

A fifth point is poverty. Poverty, even in a society that has tried to address the issue like ours' in Canada, is still a major factor in the lives of a substantial number of elderly people. Of course, the affluent always do better than the poor, and so it does help to be an affluent elderly person.

In terms of underdevelopment, there is a stereotype used to persuade elderly people that their positive contribution is no longer there, that sense of things being behind you rather than anything ahead of you. This is evidence that a certain fact has been accepted -- a fact of little or no development, or that one's best years are behind you. Actually, what opportunities and adventures one might have ahead of them might better be called variable, as they can vary considerably from individual to individual. Therefore, we are dealing here not so much with what a person is like, but rather with what the thought about particular persons is like.

The seventh point is neglect, violence, brutality and abuse. There is certainly lots of neglect around. There is an inexplicable violence, seemingly random, and directed against elderly people in our society. There is also a victimizing of the elderly, even by their own families, i.e. the "King Lear Syndrome" named for the act of a child being brutal to a parent. Also, there is much to be concerned about with regard to the over-drugging of elderly people in their residential programs. There is the theft from elderly people even by their staff. These are all things that show a certain disrespect for elderly people.

Finally, there is a denial by official society, by the old themselves, and by other generations that there is any particular problem. This is a worrisome sign. When a society keeps saying

that it's not much of a problem, just a fluke event and nothing more, that is worrisome. If there were a chance for a systematic response to it, people wouldn't speak up about it because they have denied that the problem exists in the first place.

Those are all very grim things, but they are realities. I simply don't know if these trends are universal, or wholesale, or whether they are increasing or decreasing. I do know, however, that there is enough of it and that I am worried about it. Fortunately with all of these things public concern can be influenced, and these are not the sort of things that one need be fatalistically ready for. In fact, these things are things you can act upon. You can address these issues and their related consequences. Let me point out some of the helpful things that I believe would lead to increased social security. I will give you some examples of things that, if undertaken, would constitute for elderly people a certain confidence that their social situation will be secure.

First is the emphasis on strengthening the voice of elderly people to criticize and to challenge society. They need to remind the society as well as themselves what things would be important for them to do. It is quite possible that if the voice of people being affected goes unheard, then the remedies that would logically follow from their experience will not be taken up. So, when we deny or break down the voice of people speaking out about living the reality of being old, then we can well expect difficulties. Elderly people do not constitute a block in the precise political sense. They are simply grouped by age and are not otherwise uniform. Therefore, there are lots of different issues that need to be taken up. Where that is present as an independent voice, you can be sure that as a people they are going to be safer. But when that voice is not taken seriously, then one group ends up deciding for the other group, whose issues they may not understand.

There certainly is lots of evidence of paternalism in terms of the elderly by the rest of society, whether that's done by the government, professionals or by the family. It is very important that elderly people be in key roles in deciding what is to be done as a general rule. It may still be problem, but at least those people who have to live with the consequences have been consulted. It is extremely important that if you must bear the solutions, then you must part of designing them.

Most of these things are impossible to pursue without the cooperation of social institutions, like governments and agencies. There is a tremendous job to be done in terms of the ways in which organizations in our society either accept or reject elderly citizens as a valued part of those organizations. Whether it is a local community organization, government, business and industry, or even a church group -- each of these groups has a tremendous challenge in terms of inclusion of elderly people. When the

elderly are driven out of the institutions of society and are not active influences, those institutions will not be sensitive to them. This is why it is so important for societies to preserve a proportional role for elderly citizens in the way they operate on a day-by-day basis. When you see a whole social organization where there are no elderly people, and yet the organization has something to do with the life of the community, then there is something wrong. It is a symptom.

Third is the promotion of the social solutions to the needs of elderly people that minimize the amount of separateness of elderly people from non-elderly people. I would call into question any kind of segregated housing, segregated work, segregated leisure as a sort of "natural" solution if it possible that there would be solutions that would involve a higher degree of integration. By that I mean that people would be thought of as not wanting a separate solution from the rest of society, although certainly people are permitted if they want a separate solution. But, it's when society decides that you want a separate solution that your choices get taken away from you and the options for integration lessens.

The fourth point would be the improvement of community and home support for inclusion, particularly for the elderly groups that are suffering from some kind of severe impairment which makes it very difficult in a practical sense for them to participate. There are many kinds of community services that we are fortunate to have, but also there are many that we don't have. These supports are of very practical necessity for people to preserve their economy, independence and dignity. Without those supports, one might as well take all of those things away from them. You can't have the ideal of those things but not the support that makes them possible to be independent.

Fifth is the advancement of positive, myth-breaking demonstration projects to heighten consciousness. By that I mean that you need to "rattle the cage" of society by having lots of things that demonstrate the point that certain stereotypes aren't good ones. By that I mean an active, conscious effort to really shake people up in terms of what they really think about elderly people. Things that break the mold, break the consciousness become symbols, if you like, that people can relate to in terms of having positive images. So, we need to have some picture of what an alternative to devaluation looks like.

Next is the possibility for people to have partial roles in community, perhaps not as intense as they once were but, nonetheless, not completely out of the action. This would be in-between roles, where people still can be part of the action but at a level that is, perhaps, reduced from what they used to be. Rather than be working one day and then suddenly not at all, there are lots of ways in which people can be included by degrees that we

Finally, leadership development. Everything ultimately boils down to whether people have taken leadership. It is something that can be cultivated and nurtured in people. If there is no funding for leadership development, no sense of this as a priority, then the causes that leadership might have addressed will not be causes that get very far. Causes with strong leadership are causes that do better. Therefore, leadership development is absolutely crucial if this particular cause is going to make some mileage in the next century. There will be a correlation between investments made now in leadership development and its fruits many years later.

Ninth, we must find more ways to link the broader societal issues to those of the elderly. There are many potential allies to elderly people on lots of issues, whether it is poverty, employment, safety, human rights, health care or housing. There are times for strategic alliances with other sectors of the community, of sharing political and practical strategies for making sure that we don't get too segmented in terms of being able to resolve things.

The eighth issue is the importance of preserving of family unity as much as possible. Families throughout history have played integral parts in preserving valued roles for elderly citizens. We should not give up on families simply because we are under tremendous strain and stress these days. In fact, there should be some good work done on the ways in which family life can be protected. Also, if elderly persons want their families involved in their lives, this ought to be encouraged by society. So, when a society moves your family far away from you and it is very difficult to keep, that indicates that an element of safety has been eliminated for a lot of people. Many people have no family -- for instance, I was told today that one out of three people who are institutionalized has no family at all. That is a very serious social gap that has to be addressed if people are to be safe. Some at least has to act in the role of the family.

Seventh, independent and aggressive outreach, and monitoring and exposure of abuse, violence and neglect -- if these things are covered up, not addressed or thought of, they will fester. It is a very terrible things when these things go unanswered, when harm is done to people and it takes forever for justice to be served and for the truth of the matter to come out. When a situation is created wherein people can't really be sure that violence done to them won't be followed-up or tended to, it encourages people to be insensitive and to expect the worst. When a community is not aggressive about these issues, one has to question the level of public concern. One of the signs of public concern is that no stone is left unturned, to make sure that people are safe and are treated well.

can all be much more sensitive to than we are, particularly towards people whose impairments may make it very difficult to participate.