

Sudden Illness
(Joanne Seltzer from When I Am An Old Woman I Shall
Wear Purple)

When Mother is discharged
from the hospital
you accompany her down
on the same elevator
with a young couple
bringing Baby home.

They call to mind
the Holy Family
until you realize
that every family is holy.

You feel holier-than-thou.

What a powerful reminder when ministering to/with older adults. How easy it is to forget their holiness, their sacred worth! How easy it is to see illness and frailty, rather than a soul, every bit as valuable to God as when it was housed in a younger, healthier body! How easy it is to become so entangled in the question, "How do I care for this person now?" How easy it is to see the older adult as a project to be cared for, rather than a person to engage! "...realize that every family is holy." Doesn't this imply that every member of that family is holy and sacred, most especially the old and the frail?

What does this mean? How do we affirm the sacred worth of a person even as we need to be increasingly concerned about physical care? It is different for each person, but certain things are common.

1. An older adult *may* be less capable than she once was, but her thoughts and wishes still matter.
2. The physical condition does not define the person. It is simply a fact to be acknowledged.
3. The spirit of a person is eternal. The body is fulfilling its purpose as it dies, even if it is piece by piece.
4. The emotional/spiritual needs of a person lasts a lifetime, they don't end with illness or physical limitations.
5. Sacred worth is valued each time we allow the individual to express his true feelings and needs without fear of being criticized for feeling that way.
6. Other ideas? (I love to hear them.)

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