

In her poem, "Last Visit to Grandmother" (found in When I am an Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple), Enid Shomer closes her thoughts on such a visit with this observation:

When I leave, the nurse
is helping her change for the evening.
A small virtue to want to die
as she lived: in a good
silk dress, some detail
like bugle beads
at the collar and cuffs.

Ministering to/with older adults constantly reminds me of perhaps the biggest loss so many of them face. It is the loss of the familiar routines of their lives. The ability to have breakfast when and if they want it! The choice to dress before breakfast or after! The routine of seeing neighbors and friends on a regular basis! The daily routine phone call to an adult child! So many bits and pieces – seemingly insignificant – that help define a life! So many important bits and pieces not always available to the older adult, made difficult by the need for help that can only be addressed by a nursing home, an assisted living facility, a move to an adult child's home, or a need to rely on aides who come at unfamiliar times.

"A small virtue to want to die as she lived...." Ministry to/with older adults require us to be sensitive to this virtue. Older adults are not just being stubborn when they resist change. The routines of their lives are as important to them as ours are to us. Anything we can do to enable them to retain these routines is good ministry. Clergy and concerned lay people can advocate with family members for sensitivity to this need. Family members can be helped to see that Mom or Dad has a right to be an integral part of any change in their lives, to the fullest extent possible. What their "stubborn" parent or family member is asking is nothing other than we would ask for in the same situation. "Do unto others as you would want others to unto you" is once again a maxim to live by as we seek to relate and minister to the aging – be they family members, church members, or neighbors.

Preserving as many routines for the older adult will make whatever changes are necessary easier to accept. It will enable the person to adapt more quickly to the new emerging routines and return more readily to living as fully as possible.

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