

Visiting Older Adults

“I’m going to see Sally Brown and I don’t know what to say. After all she’s 95 years old and is showing signs of Alzheimers. I’m only 33 and not used to being around people that old.”

A common concern and a common fear! Is there a right way and a wrong way to visit a person such as Sally Brown? I don’t think there is as long as the visitor is open and present to that person and to the moment. People at any age have the same need to be relational, to have a sense of value in someone else’s eyes. Visit! Say hello! Express your gladness at the chance to be with that person! Notice the environment – the way the person is dressed, the photographs in the room, the knick-knacks, etc. Enter that person’s world by asking inviting questions. (Examples: This is a beautiful photo, whose is it? I have a doll very similar to yours, how long have you had it? I always wondered about its history.) Let the one being visited set the agenda and the tone.

“When I visit on behalf of the church, do I say a prayer, do I talk about my faith?”

Again common concerns! Again, I don’t believe there’s a right or a wrong answer to the question as long as the visitor is sensitive to the person being visited. I had a professor in seminary that once answered this question from the class by saying, “If in doubt, be an answer to prayer rather than saying one.” Whether we all agree on his answer or not is less important than the sentiment. The one being visited is the most important person in the room.

Visits to older, cognitively impaired persons need not be frightening. Remember you go as a witness to the God, who loves us as we are, is slow to judge and quick to embrace. Go and visit as one who knows that God and, by your loving, embracing behavior let the one being visited know and feel that love.

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