

Finding the Right Home for the Seniors in Our Lives

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As I get older, I am more mindful of the end of my physical life. There are so many things that I am grateful for: I do not worry about work and money, and I live a retired life of my dreams. No matter how comfortable and content I am, I am also aware of the eventual fading of my bodily powers and my effectiveness, and that I will be looked upon as someone who needs to be taken care of and in need of help.

For a long time, I have thought of elders in the senior homes, who, even though they are still capable, are just passing the time before their next journey comes.

I believe that the integration of elders has to be the goal of each community since the treasures of the elders' experience and wisdom will serve the young generation who need it so desperately. That is why I want to build a home for the elders and try to make it a place where integration and collaboration between different age groups become commonplace rather than merely a dream.

Growing up in the Middle East and living in Iran, India, and China, I was exposed to different cultures and witnessed how the elders were viewed and treated. They were looked upon with respect and reverence. I remember that as children, we were taught how to behave in front of the elders because that was a sign of the proper upbringing of the children. I am surprised to see the approach that the West has taken towards our elders. Even in North America, with the exception of Native American culture, elders are often seen as a burden on social programs.



Our culture — and especially social media — give the impression that the whole world revolves around young people. Hollywood reinforces an unspoken reality that the world is the playground for the young. It is so hard to imagine a productive place for the elders in modern society. It often seems like every movie, television show, and commercial caters to the young. Frankly, it feels like the only thing left for older people to do these days is to take their medicine and wait for their turn to die.

This is such a contrast to my awareness as a Baha'i that our souls never age. The body's condition should not distract us from nurturing the soul

no matter how old we are. Our elders have been separated from society to efficiently take care of their physical needs that their spiritual and human needs have been overlooked.

Baha'u'llah, the prophet and founder of the Baha'i Faith, wrote:

“Know thou that the soul of man is exalted above, and is independent of all infirmities of body or mind. That a sick person showeth signs of weakness is due to the hindrances that interpose themselves between his soul and his body, for the soul itself remaineth unaffected by any bodily ailments.”

We should approach older people as spiritual beings and ignore their physical frailties. There is so much that can be accomplished through our elders' resources and wisdom — if only society could begin to see them in the right light. Rather than allowing them to waste away in sanitized homes where dreams die faster than bodies, we should provide them with the means to achieve goals that they may have set for their golden years.



In 1982, at the first United Nations World Assembly on Ageing, the Baha'i International Community, an international non-governmental organization that represents the members of the Baha'i Faith at the UN, offered some suggestions that I recently came across. The BIC wrote:

“That there must be full integration of the aging in the human community, since the community should be an extended family in which everyone, of any age, is an essential part, and not only allowed, but encouraged, to make the fullest possible contribution to the wellbeing of the whole; and that in considering the needs of the aging in the process of development we must take into account the wholeness of the human being, the moral and spiritual dimension, besides his emotional, intellectual, and physical nature when discussing the special contributions of older persons to development and their sharing in the resulting benefits.”

In recent years the cancer of materialism has eroded some of the old traditions of respect and care for the elders but not entirely. My visit to India earlier this year was proof. Before I visited India, I had never considered building a home for the elders there because I thought that the rich Indian culture with its deep roots in tradition would reinforce the idea of taking care of elders. I was shocked to be informed by friends that this was not the case anymore. Also, adding to the elders' sad plight was that there was no monetary help from the government.

I can picture myself in a home with limited interaction with the outside world. No matter how physically comfortable I would be, my soul would be starving for other generations' companionship. I have spent a lifetime of learning, traveling to different places, and doing amazing things in my life. I've gained so much experience that I would love to share, and I have many stories to tell.

My dream, which is based on the goal of full integration, is a home where there will be classes for children, youth activities, art classes, and visitors coming from near and far to see the vegetable garden and flowers that the elders have helped grow. I see each elder spiritually adopted by a family who takes care of them and includes them a member of their

families. I see a home of creative activities where classes are taught by the young and the elders according to their interests. Yes, it is a dream, but it is a sweet dream that is worth our energies and resources. After all, without dreams, so many of humanity's achievements would not have happened.

We must consider integrating elders into day-to-day life not just for the sake of respect and love for them but because in no time, if nothing changes, we each will be an elder experiencing loneliness and isolation. We have to change our mindset to see the elders as a source of untapped wisdom and knowledge. For the benefit of society, we can create an environment of comfort with an emphasis on integration so that before their final flight, none of their dreams are unfulfilled.