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# A REFLECTION ON ACCOMPANIMENT IN THE FACE OF SOCIALLY ISOLATED ELDERS

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Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly, my PULSE-elective service placement through Boston College, has allowed me to serve the needs of those in the elderly population who are rendered powerless through the social injustices of being isolated and lonely. I have come to learn that the social injustices affecting this target group can be identified in theological terms as being both a social sin and sin of omission. A social sin can be described as the ideological attitudes that are viewed by a dominant group in society that render other groups powerless and vulnerable to marginalization and are ultimately reinforced in societal structures through the actions of this dominant group. The social sin that I see contributing to the factor of social isolation in the elderly is our culture's blatant neglect for caring for its elders. This is also seen as a sin of omission, in which we as the dominant members in society are omitting to care for the lonely elders that are in need around us.

In his piece in *The New Yorker* titled, "This Old Man," Roger Angell describes how the dominant group in social situations often renders elder members in conversations invisible. He writes about how our conversations are often held in front of elders, but not with them.<sup>1</sup> This describes the phenomena of anomie, in which many elders are surrounded by people, but are deemed invisible and unworthy of our attention. Therefore, the dominant ideology of those 64-years and younger contribute to actions of neglect towards caring for those whom are our elders through sins of omission and social sin. Furthermore, the lack of care and attention is inevitably causing the social isolation that causes elders to have such adverse health outcomes. In an interview that I conducted with Amanda Bilski, a Tufts medical student and a Fellow with Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly, she describes a phenomenon in which the patients that she sees in her geriatric position in a primary care office often consist of elders who are brought to their visits by family members and friends. She concludes that because of these support systems, these elders have both better access to healthcare and stronger health outcomes.<sup>2</sup> She spoke about social isolation and health outcomes in the elderly as being similar to "the chicken and the egg." Negative health outcomes can lead to social isolation, but social isolation can also lead to negative health outcomes. She told me that there are many elders that don't have the opportunity to see a geriatric physician because there is simply no one there to take them.

When I sat with John Killoran on a park bench outside of his subsidized housing building in Fenway one afternoon, he told me that he needed to see the eye doctor for his blindness, but he couldn't find anyone to walk him to the doctor around the corner. I was faced with witnessing a scenario of an individual living in the heart of one of America's most populated cities, yet not having one person to ask for help. This is a result of our social sin towards the elderly. This is why I became an ally. I am an *ally* to this population because I am not considered a member in this target group, but I have spent the past few

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weeks proactively working to alleviate social isolation in a few elders' lives by providing *accompaniment*. Paul Farmer says to accompany someone, "is to go somewhere with him or her, to break bread together, to be present on a journey with a beginning and an end."<sup>3</sup> The beginning of our journey—the elders' in Boston in conjunction with my own—was on September 30, 2016, and it will end on December 16, 2016. On our journey, I have visited elders in their homes and in their assisted and subsidized housing placements. Being an *ally* in accompaniment isn't glamorous or easy. Entering into someone's home that cannot physically see the piles of mold or dirt in the corner or the expiration dates in the fridge that leave traces of sour smells is very uncomfortable. Asking elders conversational questions about their family and friends to hear that they have none that are living or that reside in this part of the world is confusing. Asking an elder if he wants to walk outside on a nice day only to hear, "I can't and I don't feel like trying," is awkward. Running to get an elder a gallon of milk and cookies with exactly \$4.40 in my hands is challenging. Hearing that an elder's eye is missing because he was caught in the crossfire of a stone fight in Southie is heart wrenching. But, as an *ally* on this journey and as a member of the youthful, physically-, and mentally-able dominant social group in society, I know that I have certain privileges that allow me to walk *with* the socially isolated elders on their own journeys.

As an ally, I do not go into elders' homes and heal their blindness, fix their attitudes about life, or change their political views and ideals. Instead, as an ally in accompaniment, I enter an elder's home and engage in conversation and bring a sense of care and respect to the elders around me. It appears to be much more simple than it is. I cannot transcend the moments experienced on the journey of accompaniment into proper words. However, these moments look like the tears shed from the elders at the conclusion of my shift, the stories of elders telling me that they called their son to tell him about our visit, and the elder woman from Iran who looked past our religious differences and called me her daughter. Moments like these create a sense of connection between those seen as invisible and myself in the group of youthfulness. It is during these moments of accompaniment that I have found myself considering the fact that I may one day actually be a part of this group.

It is easy to look past elders that have lost their loved ones and have survived to an age past of all of their friends without realizing that this fate is often inevitable for us. My placement has allowed me to question why we ignore a situation that is at the foot of our very own fate. When we walk by an elder on the street corner, shaking and trembling with a cane, *why do we look away?* I believe we look away because it is not easy to recognize that these issues and this fate are inevitable in our very own cycles of life. It is not easy to acknowledge that we may live far away from our parents and our grandparents and don't give them a call as often as we should. It isn't easy to watch a group in our society suffer from the unavoidable factors of aging. However, we are both a part of the problem and the solution of social isolation in the elderly population.

The solution occurs when we become allies through accompaniment and engage the elders in our lives by breaking bread with them and including them in our conversations and our daily interactions of life. We become advocates when we tell our stories of being allies. When I discuss what I witness in the homes of Betty and John, or in the group home at St. Cecilia's, I become an advocate. When I speak for those who I have witnessed being rendered invisible in society, I become an advocate.

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When I confront my temperamental inclinations to turn my head and look the other way, I silently show change to those around us.

After walking home from St. Cecilia's in the pouring rain one Friday night, I saw a 94-year-old woman from the home moving inch-by-inch in a wheelchair to travel one block to the store. As I watched her slowly approaching me at the street corner, I realized that it is easy to compartmentalize being an ally at a service placement and to neglect to be an ally in real life. However, I immediately ran over to the elder and guided her wheelchair onto the sidewalk path. When I looked around, I saw that we were in the middle of Fenway in downtown Boston, and people were looking at me as if I were engaging in a highly unusual act. However, by showing the few pedestrians on this street corner the power of loving, caring, and respecting the elderly, I became an advocate.

The journey of my placement may end in December 2016, but I have become an ally and an advocate for this cause for the rest of my life. I have started calling my grandmother with Alzheimer's more frequently, asked an elder professor to have dinner together, and smile and say hello to every elder I see on the street corner. This is a cause that I will not let go of, even when I am an elder myself. I invite you to join me in becoming an ally by spreading kindness to the elders in our society.

**ENDNOTE**

1. Angell, Roger, "This Old Man," *The New Yorker* (17 February, 2014). <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/02/17/old-man-3>>
2. Bilski, Amanda. Telephone Interview. 28 October 2016.
3. Farmer, Paul, "Transcripts-Accompaniment as Policy," Office of the Secretary-General's Special ADvisor on Community-Based Medicine & Lessons From Haiti. Kennedy School of Government (25 May 2011).