There's more to great old age than confusion and chaos

Crispin Henson

I WOULD get into casual conversation with a cashier at the supermarket, and say something like: “I buy this soup for my mother. She is 80,” and the response, almost invariably, would be: “You are blessed! You still have your mother!” And if I went on it say, “Koeda uguhe - she is old,” I would hear a laugh and, “Ah, they are like children!” with a sense that the old invoke in us the same pleasure as the very young.

I could not but compare that to the anxieties of middle-class people I know. They don’t know what to do with their parents as they age. Little sense of blessing there.

I do understand that the cashiers' positive attitudes to the old and the sense of respect, often erode, especially under financial pressure. Some old people in townships are abused, neglected or exploited. But when we speak of old people there is something real that I see, captured in the expression of pleasure at being in the company of people.

For instance we put our mother in an old-age home when she was 88, and after she had become confused, “seine,” a word with the most negative connotations (we forget to link it to positive terms with the same root, such as “saint”.

There she held court, seeing herself as the helper to the poor old people.

Once I visited and heard the electronic organ playing, and here she was, with two semicircles of the aged around her. She stopped playing and said: “Hello, dear. I am flying out tonight. Are you coming with me?”

I knew enough to know that her spelling would be wrong.

“France? England?”

“Shall we go - some memories, and some attitudes, stick fast.”

Then there was the matter of the war.

One resident spoke to me: “Dear, how old is your mother?”

“Eighty-eight.”

“Eighty-eight.”

“Do you remember the war?”

She invited all of us to her 100th birthday party next week.

On another occasion I called just before supper time.

My mother had a woman in tow who never spoke, but who understood well that my mother was in charge and she must follow us at the table, and my mother introduced me to the nurse. “This is my son. He is...” (she hesitated, struggling to make sense of my role in academia that few people understood anyway) the headmaster of two schools.

“Ah, Mrs Henson, if he is doing well, it is all because of you.”

This she liked. She moved into public speaking mode and said to the nurse: “I would like to say to you, thank you for everything you have done for us today.”

And then with a sense of the necessary equity in these matters, she addressed her silent companion: “And I would like to say to you too, thank you for everything you have done today.”

After a time, though, I felt unhappy about her situation, and moved her into the house, and employed my godson’s mother as a day carer. At first I would take her cup of tea in the morning. Then one day she was already at the wardrobe, pulling out clothes.

“What are you doing?”

“Ah, Mrs Henson, if he is doing well, it is all because of you.”

This she liked. She moved into public speaking mode and said to the nurse: “I would like to say to you, thank you for everything you have done for us today.”

And then with a sense of the necessary equity in these matters, she addressed her silent companion: “And I would like to say to you too, thank you for everything you have done today.”

After a time, though, I felt unhappy about her situation, and moved her into the house, and employed my godson’s mother as a day carer. At first I would take her cup of tea in the morning. Then one day she was already at the wardrobe, pulling out clothes.

“What are you doing?”

“Ah, Mrs Henson, if he is doing well, it is all because of you.”

This she liked. She moved into public speaking mode and said to the nurse: “I would like to say to you, thank you for everything you have done for us today.”

And then with a sense of the necessary equity in these matters, she addressed her silent companion: “And I would like to say to you too, thank you for everything you have done today.”

After a time, though, I felt unhappy about her situation, and moved her into the house, and employed my godson’s mother as a day carer. At first I would take her cup of tea in the morning. Then one day she was already at the wardrobe, pulling out clothes.

“What are you doing?”

“Ah, Mrs Henson, if he is doing well, it is all because of you.”

This she liked. She moved into public speaking mode and said to the nurse: “I would like to say to you, thank you for everything you have done for us today.”

And then with a sense of the necessary equity in these matters, she addressed her silent companion: “And I would like to say to you too, thank you for everything you have done today.”

After a time, though, I felt unhappy about her situation, and moved her into the house, and employed my godson’s mother as a day carer. At first I would take her cup of tea in the morning. Then one day she was already at the wardrobe, pulling out clothes.

“What are you doing?”

“Ah, Mrs Henson, if he is doing well, it is all because of you.”

This she liked. She moved into public speaking mode and said to the nurse: “I would like to say to you, thank you for everything you have done for us today.”

And then with a sense of the necessary equity in these matters, she addressed her silent companion: “And I would like to say to you too, thank you for everything you have done today.”

After a time, though, I felt unhappy about her situation, and moved her into the house, and employed my godson’s mother as a day carer. At first I would take her cup of tea in the morning. Then one day she was already at the wardrobe, pulling out clothes.

“What are you doing?”

“Ah, Mrs Henson, if he is doing well, it is all because of you.”

This she liked. She moved into public speaking mode and said to the nurse: “I would like to say to you, thank you for everything you have done for us today.”

And then with a sense of the necessary equity in these matters, she addressed her silent companion: “And I would like to say to you too, thank you for everything you have done today.”

After a time, though, I felt unhappy about her situation, and moved her into the house, and employed my godson’s mother as a day carer. At first I would take her cup of tea in the morning. Then one day she was already at the wardrobe, pulling out clothes.

“What are you doing?”

“Ah, Mrs Henson, if he is doing well, it is all because of you.”

This she liked. She moved into public speaking mode and said to the nurse: “I would like to say to you, thank you for everything you have done for us today.”