

# GRACE IN THE NURSING HOME

Ask most people how they want to spend their final years and most will respond that they'd "never want to be in a nursing home." Nursing homes are seen as places where worn out people go to die. They smell funny. They're depressing and scary with people in wheelchairs and walkers moving slowly in the halls. They remind us of our mortality so we try to avoid them at all costs.

But have you ever considered a nursing home as a place of grace? I'm finding that it truly is as I regularly visit my 93 year-old mother who's living in one after breaking her hip over a year ago. Though she'd prefer to be in her own home, she says "this is my second choice" and has begun calling her room "my condo." She sees her children and grandchildren growing closer together as a result to her being there and she is grateful for that.

She's maintained her sense of humor. When learning that my son and I would be visiting my grandson Sam for his birthday, she quipped, "Have you heard the latest? I'm going with you. Since I'm in a wheelchair, you'll get to get on the plane first." She realizes she's not able to go, but says "being silly is better than being depressed." She told me one day when I was visiting her that I was smart, then pausing, winked and added, "almost as smart as your sister." She also jokes with the staff and has a compliment for each one of them. "Annette's got the gentle hands. Brenda is always looking out for me. Millie's doing a great job of restorative care. Brie is always so gentle when she puts me to bed" and so it goes. She's got something good to say about each one who cares for her. She continues her correspondence with life-long friends. They share memories and limitations and the value of their relationships. Age has given them perspective. They know that they can no longer do the things the way they wish, that they need to depend on others for things they can no longer do for themselves, that life is winding down. Yet they live each day with hope and spirit.



I see similar patterns in many of the other seniors there. They go out of their way to welcome someone new and try to maintain positive attitudes despite their pains and bodily diminishment. She has gotten close to one of her tablemates who has a dry wit and a courageous spirit. At the end of each meal, they grab each other's hands and often say how grateful they are to have gotten to know each other. "If I don't see you again, I'll see you in heaven," they said one day.

Death and bodies and minds breaking down surround them daily, yet they manage not just to endure, but to continue to grow as they accept their situations with dignity, grace, and class. And they are freer now to tell family and friends what is on their hearts. They wear fewer masks, are more open and more in touch with God. The chaplain, who often has long talks with the residents, says she has "the best job ever."

Our African parishioners have something to teach us about aging as they respect and honor their elders. The aged are seen as sources of wisdom as they have life experience. They are the leaders of the community, the ones who set expectations for their families and hold members accountable. While they now live in a culture that tends to focus on youth and its vitality, our young people continue to value their elders and say that's a part of their culture that they want to maintain. When they learn

about my mom, they want to know more about her and often ask if they can visit or help her.

It's been said that parents are our first and best teachers. Many of us looked up to them when we were young; decided they just didn't get it when we were teens; got a new respect for them when we became parents ourselves and had our own children to rear; and now, as we begin to age, we look again to them to show us the way.

From her "condo" at the nursing home, my Mom's continuing to be a great teacher.

*-Angela Anno, Pastoral Associate*