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Moving Toward an Optimal Multi-generational Community Life Center

As Confucius said, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” When I took the step to change my governing question, I did not anticipate embarking on a personal journey.

Initially, my intent was to research and educate myself about alternatives to the Advanced Placement curriculum so that I could help lead those discussions in my school. However, after the first class it struck me that instead I should seize this opportunity to take the time to research and develop an idea has knocked around in my head for years. This persistent idea was to expand beyond standard nursing homes and daycare centers to create a residential community that deliberately fostered relationships between senior adults, children, and animals. I thought choosing this as my research project would simply help me determine whether my idea was worthwhile and feasible, and perhaps result in the nugget of a workable business plan that someone else could put into practice. What I did not realize was, in so doing, I also took my first step toward a potential significant career and life change. This is an account of my journey thus far.

Where the Idea Began

I’m not sure what originally inspired me to imagine a community that engages seniors, children, animals, and nature. Perhaps it was the recognition that, increasingly, we isolate ourselves in “planned” communities that segregate us by age, by income, and by distance. We rely more on our cars and technology and less on each other. Over recent years, I noticed that cities and real

estate developers had success in mixing commercial, retail, and residential properties to revitalize urban and suburban areas. I began to consider what might happen if we did the same in terms of who and what lives in those mixed-use areas. Could seniors, families with children, animals, and gardens share communal spaces and engage with each other in a meaningful way? Whatever the trigger, the seeds for my idea were sown in my childhood, in my life experience and, to some extent, my career to this point.

One seed was how I grew up. I had the benefit of living near, and sometimes with, extended family. We lived in the same town as my father's family. As a result, I had frequent contact with my paternal grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. My mother's family all lived in England. Each summer of my childhood, we flew over and lived with my maternal grandmother for six weeks, spending concentrated time with relatives and friends of all ages. Those saturated weeks sustained loving relationships throughout the rest of the year when we were physically distant from each other. My sister and I were further fortunate to have an older couple as regular caregivers. Mr. and Mrs. Jacobs became surrogate grandparents and they were a fixture in our lives for many years. As a result, I learned life lessons and about living not just from my parents, but also in large part from the myriad relatives of all ages that I came to know and love.

Spending time with my grandparents (surrogate and biological) and older relatives helped me understand both my own family history as well as all that they had experienced of world events.

I witnessed first-hand that older people can be energetic, active participants in life.

By contrast, when I had my first child, I did not live near any extended family. It was hard enough when I was home to face the challenges of caring for a baby without family support

nearby. It was even more daunting to manage it once I went back to work. By the time my son was born four and a half years later, we lived in the same town as his paternal grandparents. It made a world of difference. Having extended family nearby gave us access to experience, advice, and support. They provided assistance when a child was sick or childcare was unavailable. They allowed us the occasional night out or away. We also were fortunate to observe the love and joy in the relationship shared between the generations.

Another seed was planted by having pets for the majority of my life. For most of my childhood, we had a beloved dog, as well as hamsters, goldfish, and at one point, a chicken. As an adult, I have owned both cats and dogs. In addition to the love and enjoyment I derived from every one of them, I learned what it means to be responsible for another living creature, and to put another's needs before my own. I became better skilled at non-verbal communication. I also witnessed the cycle of life play out.

Another, albeit small, seed comes from my experiences at work. At each of the three independent schools I have worked, we have had a Grandparents' Day. Regardless of the type of school – one is a boarding high school, one is a day school for students in nursery through grade 12, and one is a day school for high school students – the response and interest from the grandparents has been remarkable. They are happy to spend time with their grandchildren, eager to experience a day at school, engaged and active in class, and curious to meet their grandchildren's peers. Though purely anecdotal and admittedly from a small sampling, my observations lead me to believe that grandparents want to engage in the lives of their

grandchildren, and that despite pro forma protests to the contrary, our students relish the time with them as well.

I realized a final seed stems from the two years I volunteered in a small hospice house. It was a profound experience to engage with the families and patients as they faced the end of life. It made me really examine how we approach death and dying in our culture, and by extension, how we view aging and our seniors in general.

From those combined seeds, the idea outlined above sprouted, but I did not give it the time and attention necessary for it to grow into anything substantive. After deciding on this as my project, the next step was to prove the validity of my idea with some research.

Contributing Factors

Numerous issues and factors demand that as a society we develop more options for healthy communities in which we all can live. First and foremost is our rapidly aging population.

According to the Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Aging, “the older population – persons 65 years or older – numbered 38.9 million in 2008 (the latest year for which data is available). They represented 12.8% of the U.S. population, about one in every eight Americans. By 2030, there will be about 72.1 million older persons, more than twice their number in 2000. People 65+ represented 12.4% of the population in the year 2000 but are expected to grow to be 19%...by 2030.”ⁱ

A second factor is the changing face of the American family. While the percentage of single parent households held fairly steady at about 9% from 1996 through 2006, the increase in dual income households has been striking. An April, 1998 article in the Monthly Labor Review noted that "...labor force participation rates among married women have increased dramatically in recent decades, rising from 35 percent in 1966 to 61 percent in 1994. The increase was even more dramatic for married women with children under 3 years: 21 percent to 60 percent over the same period."ⁱⁱ The result of such growth is that the dual-earner model is quickly replacing the "traditional" model of a single breadwinner paired with a homemaker.

A third factor is that increased mobility and the necessity for relocating for employment can often mean that we may not live near extended family. This leads to fewer avenues of emotional and social support for families with young children, particularly those in dual-income households. Similarly, this can also mean that older generations wind up isolated and distant from family as well.

A fourth factor in the equation is the staggering number of animals who enter shelters each year. According to a recent estimate from the Humane Society of the United States, somewhere between 6-8 million cats and dogs annually end up in shelters, with only about half that number fortunate enough to be adopted. The rest are euthanized.ⁱⁱⁱ

A final factor to consider is our reduced experience and interaction with the natural world. "In one generation, the percentage of people who reported that the outdoors was the most influential

environment of their childhood dropped from 96% to 46%.^{iv} A study in 2004 found that “children aged 3 to 23 spend 1% of their time outdoors, and 27% with electronic media.”^v

“We are losing direct experiences with nature. Instead, more and more we’re experiencing nature represented technologically through television and other media. Children grow up watching Discovery Channel and Animal Planet, playing with robotic pets, and taking virtual tours of the Grand Canyon on their computers. That’s probably better than nothing. But as a species we need interaction with actual nature for our physical and psychological well-being.”^{vi}

It is critical that as humans we continue to engage with and experience the natural world. There is “evidence and theory to support the contention that human physical and mental well-being inextricably depends on the quality (if not the quantity) of people’s experience of the natural environment.”^{vii}

There is significant body of research which shows that isolation of seniors contributes to depression, suppresses their ability to heal, and triggers or exacerbates physical ailments. “The prevailing belief, one that is espoused by the World Health Organization (2003), is that social isolation and exclusion are associated with ‘increased rates of premature death, lower general well-being, more depression, and a higher level of disability from chronic diseases’.”^{viii}

When we isolate our seniors, we impoverish their lives and ours. We lose the benefit of the wisdom they have gained through their life experiences. “Seniors who are socially isolated are disengaged from their families and peers and are likely not volunteering their time to contribute to their communities. When one examines seniors’ social isolation from a ‘lost opportunity’

perspective it takes on additional meaning. From a social perspective, when seniors are isolated and do not volunteer, the community is losing out on their valuable contributions.”^{ix}

Segregation of the generations also can lead to the development of negative stereotypes about aging, which not only affect our interactions but also can impact health and longevity. A 1991 report indicates “several studies suggest that elder’s decline in life satisfaction and younger people’s increased belief in negative stereotypes about aging seem to be associated with the trend toward age separation.”^x Children as young as three-years old already can have formed these stereotypes.^{xi} This affects how they view the mental and physical capabilities of older generations, what they might learn from seniors, and their comfort level with older people. It also significantly affects how they view the natural process of aging in general, as well as their own aging in particular. These negative stereotypes feed into our cultural obsession with youth and fear of aging. Instead, the goal should be for children “at the earliest possible age to develop a healthy and realistic view of aging, to understand that they can maximize their own opportunities for quality of life, and to develop understanding of the complex issues of living in an aging world.”^{xii} Studies show that direct engagement among seniors and the young is more effective at combating negative stereotypes than simply sharing information.^{xiii}

Possible Solutions

The combined issues of a rapidly aging and increasingly isolated senior population, a significant increase in dual-income families, loss of the support of extended family, children’s (and I would argue, adults’) disengagement from the natural world, and a large population of unwanted pets

present our society with significant, but not insurmountable challenges. We do have an understanding of ways to reduce their impact.

We know that caring for a pet can make children more empathic and cooperative, can improve their social competency and sense of responsibility, and can develop their ability to nurture. Pet ownership makes them more aware of the environment and of how their behavior affects other living things. A pet can nurture a child's emotional well-being through touch and the expression of nonjudgmental affection. "Affective encounters with animals, and with nature in general, tend to be so significant that most adults looking back on their childhood cite the natural world as an emotionally critical aspect of their youth."^{xiv}

For adults, there is some research to suggest that pet ownership might promote greater psychosocial stability. Another study indicates that owning pets improves cardiovascular health by decreasing blood pressure and heart rates. Engaging with an animal reduces loneliness and isolation that combats depression and can increase alertness and attention in seniors.

Opportunities to involve seniors with care of younger children can also work to combat isolation and promote "generational empathy".^{xv} "The most common type of program aimed at reducing social isolation and loneliness found in the literature was a type of peer (volunteer) helping/visiting outreach model. Several examples of these types of programs are presented as well as others that involve peer support groups and programs that recruit seniors to volunteer with other populations such as children."^{xvi} Activities do need to be age-appropriate and

engaging for each population. Music (both making and listening), cooking, arts and crafts, and gross motor (dancing, rhythm games, etc.) activities adapt well to inter-generational programs.

I discovered early in my research that my idea to bring children, seniors, animals, and engagement with nature together in one facility is hardly original. I was initially disappointed not to be the first person to consider such a place. Upon reflection, however, I felt pleased to have found proof not only that it is a reasonable idea, but also that I found successful examples of existing facilities nearby.

The Eden Alternative began in 1991 as a result of the experiences of Dr. William Thomas, a Harvard-trained geriatrician. Despite his best technical efforts, Thomas realized that he – as well as the medical establishment – was failing to cure his patients of “plagues of the human spirit.” What he encountered every day were “patients suffering and dying from loneliness, helplessness, and boredom.”^{xvii} The Eden Alternative is now a large non-profit organization with over 300 registered homes internationally. Four facilities are in Massachusetts. Others exist in 41 states and in Europe, Canada, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. In accordance with the Eden Alternative’s ten guiding principles (Appendix A), “places that have adopted the Eden Alternative typically are filled with plants, animals, and are regularly visited by children.”^{xviii}

I also discovered Salmon Health and Retirement, a family-owned organization founded in 1952 with several facilities in Massachusetts.^{xix} At their Whitney Place locations, in Natick and Northbridge, MA, residents have regular opportunities to engage with the children enrolled at the childcare center on site. They actively promote intergenerational programs like Mommy and Me

groups, and partner with local elementary schools and Girl Scout troops. Although not registered as an Eden Alternative affiliate, their facilities and programs closely resemble that model.

Concerns and Questions

Not everyone is convinced of the value of intergenerational facilities that include animals and gardens. The primary concerns and questions about facilities that engage seniors, children, and animals center on the safety of all parties involved. In all cases I found, trained and screened childcare workers staffed any childcare program that involved seniors. Seniors generally were volunteers, or participated in joint programming (i.e., art, cooking, or music projects). Activities were well supervised and age appropriate. The ability of seniors with dementia or Alzheimer's to interact appropriately with young children also presented concern. Some findings show that the potential benefits far outweigh any concern. Again, in all instances, I found more than adequate screening mechanisms and monitoring of any interactions between impaired seniors and children. Similarly, animals are well screened for appropriate temperament and compatibility with humans. "Animal-Free Zones" exist in every facility I researched. Interaction with animals is purely by choice. Staff and management address questions of hygiene, allergies, and behavioral issues proactively. While I was not able to find any research on the topic, I suspect that residential living options that allow seniors to keep their pets remove one painful aspect of having to leave their home and move into an assisted living or nursing home.

I think the most productive next step would be to arrange on-site visits to several nearby facilities. It would be helpful to see the theory put into practice, and to have the opportunity to

interview some of the staff and administration. I think the Interview Guide would be a useful jumping off point, but I would tailor my questions to each specific site. Ideally, I would also have a chance to speak with some of the residents and families who participate in these programs.

Continuing the Journey

My exploration to this point has been valuable and fruitful. I am better informed about the underlying issues that affect our seniors, children, and animals. The existence of The Eden Alternative and Whitney Place and other research proves the validity of my idea. I know it can be done. The questions I have now, and did not anticipate, are: can it be done better; and, perhaps more importantly, how and if I can do it? I did not expect to find myself at a career crossroads when I embarked on this project. I find it unsettling, daunting and yet somewhat exhilarating to even entertain the possibility of switching paths so dramatically. Were I to start over, my governing question would focus more on finding out how a person makes such a big career change. At this juncture, though, I can map out how I might begin.

Next Steps

It will be critical to visit some of these facilities in person. I can arrange to visit Whitney Place in Natick and one of the Eden affiliates in the area. The Eden Alternative also sponsors workshops and seminars throughout the year. Attending one would be a good way to deepen my understanding of their model. Part of my exploration would be to determine which of my skills and experiences would transfer, and which ones I would need to develop. I will need to determine whether I will have to pursue further schooling

If I were to create my own facility, what would set it apart from those that already exist? One variation may be to design a community with the specific intention of being multi-generational, pet-friendly, and environmentally engaged. Housing options would be available from single-family dwellings, to condominiums and apartments, to assisted living and rehabilitation facilities. Within the community would exist on-site daycare and after-school programs for resident families, staffed by professionals and augmented by the seniors living in the community. Programming would provide formal and informal opportunities for families, seniors, and children to interact. Indoor and outdoor physical fitness facilities would be open to all residents, as would a community garden. Again, the garden could be integrated into programming through the childcare center and the senior living center. The garden could also supply the on-site restaurant and catering options. Food services could range from a full-service restaurant serving breakfast, lunch and dinner, to takeout and prepared meals, and catering for residents. Similar to the garden, the restaurant facilities could be integrated into classes and programs for all residents. Finally, a continuing education program could be developed that would be open to all residents. The oversight and development would need to be administered by a professional, but programming could tap into the wisdom and expertise of everyone in the community. Lectures, workshops, and tutoring are just some of the options that come to mind.

I need to further research the development of a small business model. I received good advice from one of my informants about contacting the local Small Business Council, tapping into appropriate listservs, and researching what resources may be available through the Chamber of Commerce. Other potential resources are the National Assisted Living Association and the umbrella Eden Alternative organization.

.The last and most important questions I need to answer are practical and personal. Can I afford to change careers at this point? What would I be giving up? What would I potentially gain? How would this affect my ability to pay for my children's college? What would the impact be on my retirement savings? Would I consider leaving my current career path to join the staff of an existing facility? How would I go about securing funding if I were to branch out on my own? Is this something I can ease into, by volunteering or working a second job, or would it require a wholesale investment of my time? While I feel competent to work through a budget and projected income needs, I do not think I would be wise to try to navigate these waters on my own. I will need help, guidance and support not just from my family and friends, but also from someone external. That could take several forms: a life coach; an entrepreneur or small business group; an online community of business owners; appropriate books and articles.

I don't have to make the decision until I feel comfortable with the answers to these questions. It is enough that I am this far along the road and interested in going further. I learn something about myself with each step. That alone is worth the journey.

Eden Alternative 10 Principles

1. The three plagues of loneliness, helplessness, and boredom account for the bulk of suffering among our Elders.
2. An Elder-centered community commits to creating a human habitat where life revolves around close and continuing contact with plants, animals, and children. It is these relationships that provide the young and old alike with a pathway to a life worth living.
3. Loving companionship is the antidote to loneliness. Elders deserve easy access to human and animal companionship.
4. An Elder-centered community creates opportunity to give as well as receive care. This is the antidote to helplessness.
5. An Elder-centered community imbues daily life with variety and spontaneity by creating an environment in which unexpected and unpredictable interactions and happenings can take place. This is the antidote to boredom.
6. Meaningless activity corrodes the human spirit. The opportunity to do things that we find meaningful is essential to human health.
7. Medical treatment should be the servant of genuine human caring, never its master.
8. An Elder-centered community honors its Elders by de-emphasizing top-down bureaucratic authority, seeking instead to place the maximum possible decision-making authority into the hands of the Elders or into the hands of those closest to them.
9. Creating an Elder-centered community is a never-ending process. Human growth must never be separated from human life.
10. Wise leadership is the lifeblood of any struggle against the three plagues. For it, there can be no substitute.

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