

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Blog: December 9, 2016

MORAL OBLIGATIONS IN OLD AGE

By

Michael B. Friedman, MSW
Adjunct Associate Professor
Columbia University School of Social Work

Recently I took a philosophy mini-course called “Conscientious Citizenship”, which explored our moral obligations largely through the heroic image of Socrates, who accepted a death sentence as a matter of principle and loyalty to his nation.

Although several of us questioned Socrates’ presumed heroism, the course got me thinking about what the obligations of citizenship are; and, because I am an older, retired person (73 as I write this), it got me wondering what the obligations of older, retired people are and whether they are different from the obligations of younger people.

A strange question perhaps. It is commonplace to think about what society ought to do for old people. But this is the converse question, Kennedyesque in a way. Not what does a society owe to old people, but what do old people owe to their society?

I think that ageism is the reason this question is so rarely raised. There’s an assumption that old people need help. Their presumed disabilities release them from moral obligations we take for granted for younger people.

Clearly, that is the wrong presumption. Most old people are not disabled and in need of help for basic functions. Yes, most older people have chronic health conditions, and some of these limit what they are able to do. But fewer than 15% of people 65 and older have activity limitations that require routine help with basic activities. This increases with age, but even at 85 fewer than half have limitations that require help with basic activities of life.¹

In fact, most old people are quite capable and can be extremely helpful to their society. And, come to think of it, even old people with disabilities who need help often can be helpful. Can’t an old person in a wheelchair write letters of protest or support, make a financial contribution, attend a rally, or

even go from apartment to apartment in a building with an elevator to advocate for the political candidate of their choice?

So from the standpoint of ability, being old does not let people off the moral hook. Old people owe their societies something. But what?

One type of answer draws from heroic images. I think not of Socrates but of great moral leaders during my lifetime like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela. All not only risked their own lives in the name of social justice, they also were able to recruit followers, generally far more ordinary people—young, middle-aged, and old—who sacrificed safety and comfort or even their lives because they believed that their cause was not only just but morally and historically essential. Their souls and the soul of their society were at stake.

These ordinary people, who followed famous leaders, were also moral heroes. Should we all seek to emulate them?

King sometimes said that the “hottest place in Hell is reserved for those people who remain neutral in times of great moral conflict.” He found it unacceptable for people to remain on the sidelines while others fought the (non-violent) battles that had to be fought, risking their lives and livelihoods.

Clearly, this is a time of great moral conflict. Poverty, disparity, and lingering racism and discrimination in the United States call out for social action. Disparity between developed countries and “developing” countries is perhaps an even more troubling issue. That a billion people or more scrub out a living of less than \$1 a day is awful. So is the plight of millions of refugees fleeing their homes in the hopes that they and their children will survive and ultimately make lives for themselves. The rise in population and power of groups of religious fundamentalists prepared to slaughter others for their beliefs threatens to bring about a major moral regression in the history of humanity. And there are frightening threats to the survival of the human species—climate change, nuclear warfare, depleted water supply, and more.

I think of these issues and know that, except for clever conversation, I and most people I know are effectively on the sidelines. Am I, are we all, headed, as King would have it, for the hottest place in Hell? Or are we forgiven moral lassitude and preference for a restful retirement because we are old and have “paid our dues”?

I confess that I don’t forgive myself, and lately I have made harsh and angry self-judgments while watching the horrors of human life on TV. I am loathe

to make the same harsh judgement of others who, like me, have chosen comfortable retirements instead of active social advocacy, although maybe I should.

But wait a minute. Even if there are moral obligations in old age—and I believe there are—not all of our obligations are to society. There are also, as there are throughout our lives, obligations to our families and to ourselves. Think of the older people who are consumed taking care of their own parents. Think about grandparents who are providing care for their grandchildren ranging from occasional babysitting to substitute parenting, some joyously, some at great costs to themselves. Think of older people who volunteer some of their time for a cause they care about. Think of older people who have returned to school or become artists of one kind or another—people who are working to better themselves. They may never be among the world’s moral leaders or important scholars, writers, painters, or musicians, but they are fulfilling obligations I think we all have to cultivate our abilities.

Alexander Hamilton aside, it is not possible to do it all. Heroic social action, taking responsibility for one’s family, and cultivating personal excellence cannot each be fully done. We must choose among and balance fulfilling our various obligations. Isn’t it morally permissible to be a devoted grandparent or a serious student or an aspiring artist while sitting on the sidelines of the great moral issues of our time?

A few years ago I was at a political fundraiser sitting across a table from a black man who asked me, a white Jew, what I did during the civil rights movement of the 1960s when I was in college and graduate school. I did not realize until later that his question was akin to the *sotto voce* question I ask Germans now in their 80s about where they were during the Holocaust. So I answered truthfully that I had not gone on the freedom rides to the South or been otherwise particularly active in the civil rights movement, though I supported it (on the sidelines I’m sure he thought). Instead, I had followed another common path of the time, the cultural path, by studying and teaching philosophy and hanging out with friends who were aspiring writers, artists, and musicians attempting to create new ideas and new forms of art and music, forms that broke with the past and were revolutionary in a metaphorical rather than in a literal, political sense.

I am embarrassed that I didn’t realize that his question was a prelude to an indictment, but it strikes me as both a perfectly adequate answer and a morally adequate life choice.

In retirement, I have made a similar life choice. After a career as a social worker largely devoted to social advocacy to help people with mental illness, I have mostly withdrawn from the pursuit of social causes. Instead, I work at music, photography, and writing. I teach. I travel. And I enjoy my family—most of the time.

So I ask again, am I headed to the hottest place in Hell? Well, I don't believe there's an afterlife, but thinking about conscientious citizenship and King's condemnation of those who sit on the sidelines has made me question my choice to retire, to leave social advocacy behind, and not to actively commit myself to any of the social causes that I say that I care about. I am on the sidelines, and it troubles me to be, like *Candide*, cultivating myself rather than working to repair a world very much in need of repair.

Does being old let me off the hook?

I don't think so. But I also think that being morally heroic is not the only way to meet the obligations of citizenship as an old person or, for that matter, as a younger person.

There is a minimalist answer as well as a heroic answer to the question of what our obligations are. A minimalist answer would identify limited but important moral obligations of citizenship such as voting, contributing money to important causes and to admired political candidates, signing a petition, perhaps volunteering for a charitable or political organization, and so forth. These are things that almost all of us can do without disrupting our lives, without reducing our creature comforts. These are things that we can do even if we are caregivers for disabled family members, even if we are devoted grandparents, even if we have gone back to school, even if we have chosen to pursue an art, or even if we have chosen to lay back in old age and rest on our past achievements.

And these minimal moral activities are important. If everyone voted, gave money, and participated in a bit of advocacy, it would be a vast improvement in the American democracy.

But would this protect us from the "hottest place in Hell." Frankly, I'm not sure.

¹ Drabek, J and Marton W. (2015) "Measuring The Need for Long-Term Services and Supports: Research Brief". Office of the HHS Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. July 1, 2015.