

The Vicissitudes Of Old Age

John W. Ritenbaugh (1932-2023)
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This afternoon I am going to take you into the ancient history of John Ritenbaugh for just a little touch of those times.

I can remember when I was in elementary school and that age, of course, living in a small community that had about twenty homes in it, just north of Pittsburgh. There was a rather odd and elderly lady living with her much-younger family. Everybody referred to her as Mother Barker. I have no idea of exactly what age she actually was, but I believe that she was over 80. When I was just a boy in elementary school, that was a pretty old age. I perhaps paid a bit more attention to her than most my age because her granddaughter was in the same elementary school class as me. For all I knew, she may have been Mother Barker's great-granddaughter.

Mother Barker also dressed oddly as well, at least oddly according to my standards. My memory of her was that she was always dressed solidly in black, from the top of her head to the soles of her feet. She was a tiny person who always wore black high-topped shoes that seemed right out of the "gay nineties" [1890s]. There was no public transportation out in the farm community, and though her younger family members had one automobile, the schedules of everybody living in the home were not very well-coordinated, so Mother Barker, despite her aged appearance (to my young mind), walked everywhere she went—and the walks were not short.

Remember, she's over eighty years old. It was one mile from her home to the end of the streetcar line. It was then two more miles to go wherever there were stores that she could shop in and buy food. She walked that, too. She was a local legend. People reported seeing her all over the place in the borough nearest to our farming township home. I do not ever recall speaking to her even one time, not even to say hello, though she was not unpleasant looking at all. What intimidated me was she appeared so old (to me), and old people we were taught in my days to be treated deferentially.

She was not all wrinkled up, but there was no doubt that she gave the appearance of being far older than my grandparents, who knew Mother Barker, apparently from seeing her at church services from time to time. She was probably at least in her 80s, maybe her mid-80s, and still walking everywhere, doing the family's food shopping. Being seen all over town, I wonder how many stories she had to pass on to her children and grandchildren. She undoubtedly had seen and heard a great deal of local news while on her long walks.

As you can probably tell, I thought of her recently. I never heard of Mother Barker's death, but I was a very young witness of the direct and the tenacious manner in which she met a major family problem with a great deal of sacrifice on her part. Remember, she's 85—that's how old I am today. She was 85 and she walked everywhere, this little old lady. When she got where she was going, she went shopping, carried the baskets and the bags home, as she walked home, too, probably at least another three miles. She wouldn't go on the streetcars because they cost money. Actually, at that time—three "checks" for a quarter; it was eight and a third cents each way. But she did not spend the money. I can look back at that and I have to ask myself, "Why was she having to labor so strenuously at such an old age?"

Aged people often interested me, and now Evelyn and I are aged. The oldest couple that I have ever met was in Orange County, California. In their youth, they had traveled to central Texas in a covered wagon. Not on a road, mind you, but simply by means of a horse-drawn wagon on a rutted trail. It was not at all a paved road. They set up a house—they had to build it themselves; a soddy, if you know what a soddy is—and the old man told me that whenever they wanted a horse, they just went out on the prairie and got one. This man had been told by older family members that he had been held by Jesse James, not long before James himself was murdered.

I have never been the oldest member of a congregation because in every congregation I have been part of, Evelyn has also been part of it and she is a little over ten months older than I.

My mother lived to be 93, and at her death she had no idea who my brother and I were when we went to visit her. This was because she was enduring the

no-man's-land of Alzheimer's disease. Before she reached that point, she told me what I am sure many older people have admonished those younger ones. I do not remember how old she was when she said it to me, and she did not make a big deal out of it in some kind of a formal announcement. I do remember that my father was already dead; he died in 1973 during the Days of Unleavened Bread, and I missed his funeral. She said it matter-of-factly in the attitude, as though, well, this is just something everybody knows. She said, "Old age is not for sissies."

I have titled this commentary—which is really just the first part of a second one that's coming—"The Vicissitudes of Old Age." "Vicissitude" is a term that we do not use very much, but its meaning is descriptive of the realities of many, many in their elderly years. The term literally means, "An alternation; a switching, back-and-forth movement; an unsteadiness; an unevenness that tends toward stress rather than a lifting of burdens."

It is interesting to me as I age how Solomon concludes his writing of Ecclesiastes, whose theme basically teaches. . .even though this phrase is never uttered by him within the book. His writing is not gender specific, and to me, it primarily seems aimed at those in early adulthood. So, that does not include Evelyn and I. Ecclesiastes is teaching us not to be deceived by our youthful experiences. Solomon's counsel, especially in chapters 11 and 12, is pointedly aimed at young adults. He is teaching that in life, everything matters.

Can you imagine that? He is teaching about life in Ecclesiastes that nothing should be overlooked or forgotten (just the discarding of those things that are of no real use). Everything matters, and what that means now is that cause-and-effect are alive in God's creation and they cannot be entirely avoided. Very often toward the twilight of life, the piper must be paid. I do not know who originally said it, but "those who live by the sword, die by the sword,"—that's cause and effect. The past all too often comes back to haunt us. Thus, Solomon's overall advice is that in wisdom, we should do what we can to avoid the possibilities that the past is going to come back and *whack* us right on the rear end.