

The Problem

What situation do your grandparents, or the older people in your life, find themselves as you are reading this? If I asked you what they were doing right now, in this moment, could you answer? As I'm writing this, I know my grandmother is alone in her home yet happy, relishing in UVA's favorable semifinal performance. You will likely think of your Grandparents in their own sort of happy place: perhaps at home still leading independent lives integrated with the community, or in assisted living homes navigating a new, but not necessarily bad, stage of life. But you might also reflect on this and realize that you aren't really that connected to the older people in your life. In the US, [about 28%](#) of older adults, or 13.8 million people, were living alone as of 2019, a number that is [only growing](#) over time. While this number is quite high compared to the rest of the world (where the average is [16% of older adults](#) living alone), similarities are seen in Europe, such as in the UK where over [a million older adults](#) say they've gone "over a month without speaking to a friend, neighbor or family member". As an effect of these conditions, this population experiences loneliness and social isolation [at a disproportionate rate](#) and the effects are anything but trivial. For older people, experiencing social isolation and loneliness are correlated with a 29% and 26% increased likelihood of mortality respectively, an effect [arguably worse than smoking, obesity, or physical inactivity](#).

Though it can often be easy to disconnect and not see this pain, we had a rare moment of it coming to the fore recently with COVID, where the loneliness of older people cut off to the world and not nearly as technologically connected became apparent. I myself didn't realize quite how hard it was for my grandmother until I asked her about how she got through it for this project, when she told me "I often figured **the next day couldn't be any worse** and hoped it could be better, glad to wake up the next day knowing I'd survived the day before." Please look at the top two photographs, and try to imagine what life like this might be like for a few minutes.

"Yes" the immediate reply could be heard, "this is the case for those who are left to live at home, but my grandparents are in a nursing home, precisely to help prevent this sort of isolation" and I get it, at a first glance, despite their downfalls, you might think this is one of nursing homes' key upsides. But loneliness appears to actually be higher in nursing homes than in the community. A review of 11 studies indicated that ["35% of people](#) in residential and nursing homes were **very lonely**," a rate higher than that of those living alone in the community. My grandmother would prefer to quit all medication rather than be put in a nursing home because "most are just places for people to go and die where for interaction in a day, you can't really count on more than breakfast, lunch, dinner and your pills." To give fuller color to this experience, I'd next like to relate part of my experience with Doris, something you can read about further [here](#), if you'd like.

As part of the Adopt a Grandparent Program (AAGP) at UVA, I was paired up to meet weekly on Wednesday for dinner with someone in a local nursing home that could use some company. From the outset I noticed Doris had a surprising degree of mental acuity, able to follow all the conversational paths we took and often explaining what was going on to the others when they got confused. It was so surprising, in fact, that wondering why she was in the nursing home at all led me to learn that she was only there at first because her eyesight had deteriorated, leaving her unable to drive to get groceries anymore, not having any friends or family in the area that

could do this for her. Over the course of about half a year, I got to share just a sliver of the experience of the nursing home that Doris lived and breathed every day, and many things surprised me.

The Troubles of Death and Degeneration

For starters, you might think that nursing homes offer some stability, that there would be many familiar faces there that could easily serve as the bedrock from which friendship could be built. But turnover was the rule, most often coming in the form of people having health complications that left them unable to attend dinner, but sometimes death too, both things that were apt to add more than a tinge of sadness to the room. This turn of events unfolded in the microcosm of our table, starting with 5 and lively conversations that included the whole table, but soon whittled down to 4 and unable to keep a coherent conversation going if we tended to the confusion of everyone at the table.

If you've ever experienced the inability to communicate with someone who doesn't speak your language it's kind of like that, but much sadder because there's no Google Translate equivalent for mental degeneration.

Our meetings ended with COVID, unable to visit her anyways due to restrictions. I tried calling after a while, feeling disappointed that it had taken me that long but eager to reconnect. But when I finally made it through, I could tell things had changed. She didn't really remember who I was, and I came away from that call fairly sad, feeling that even if I were able to make it in again that I had probably already lost the friend I had known. This is also probably a good time to mention that, as much as I may take a moralizing tone here, I am far from perfect, as the next bit makes clear. Even after the restrictions had been lifted, I found it really, really hard to make the time in my increasingly busy academic and social schedule to go see her. This echoed the experience of a friend who started out doing AAGP with me, but who left the program after the first few months due to being too busy. Meeting after meeting when she didn't show up Doris would ask where she was and I imagine, at least for a time, Doris similarly asked herself where I was, a question that went unanswered, as by the time I made it there to check in many months later, she was gone. Look for emptiness and you'll find the table we once sat at now two empty chairs, ones where Doris and I last sat together.

Another experience I'd like to relate here is the one I shared with my grandfather. Riddled by Parkinson's in his later years, I saw a man full of vitality turn into someone who was hard to recognize; someone who, by the end, I had trouble identifying as the man I once knew. In his last few years at home with my Grandmother, my experience roughly echoed her's where "our interaction didn't really exist". When it finally got so bad he had to be put in a nursing home, I found myself livid at my family, an emotion that dulled when I began to feel the hardships more fully in my 1-on-1 time with him at the nursing home. While I could still find ways to elicit stories of the past out of him sometimes, I often came into the room to sit down with someone who didn't really know who I was, who sometimes would forget where he was or find himself unable to carry on any conversation. One way I found to try to get around this was to bring my chess board, something he seemed to have capacity for even when he wasn't up to talking much, and something we'd bonded over as he taught me the game when I was little. But as his moves

became more and more senseless, and over time I began to feel every checkmate as more a loss than a gain.

I hope these two stories help illustrate the lived situation of the problem I'm trying to speak of here and also work towards helping recognize the hardship of creating relationships with older people. While our reluctance to accept the impermanence of anything in life is well noted, I think perhaps the hardest journey in life is finding how to accept the coming and going of relationships, especially those of deep importance. Creating a tight bond with older people in your life is an inherently risky endeavor, one apt to open you up to the soul crushing experience of having someone you deeply care about not recognize you. You also will likely be the person left to pick up the pieces in the relationship, the one who now has to find a way to move on past the constant reminders of them in the world, following the death of a loved one. You now become the one eating alone on Wednesday night, wishing you could turn back the clock.

All this paints a very grim picture, highlighting the pain of loneliness felt by older people and the hardships of creating a relationship with them, so you might be left to wonder, why would I ever want to try to set out on this journey?

The Beauty

When I set out to interview my grandmother, trying to get a sense of her own connection to the hardships of loneliness mentioned above, she was stubbornly optimistic. Though she has struggled all the same, she repeatedly highlighted her vitality and what she was able to do in the face of it all. In her eyes it's all about how you react, and she feels she's been able to build a very happy life for herself, even as she lives alone.

Every weekday for lunch, except for Tuesdays when she has Bridge, you can find her preparing lunch for those in my family who work in town: my mother, my father, my uncle, my aunt. There's definitely a fair few classics in there that she's come to like over the years, but she still likes to mix it up somewhat frequently and try out new recipes on her "guinea pigs". Through cooking she's helped teach me some of the virtues of life, of patience and planning, and through this practice of making lunch she's taught me much about how to create and bind together a family. Her kitchen is where my family finds its home, and she stands as the glue that binds us all together. I tell you all this in an effort to try to put words to the beauty of one of the deepest connections I have in life. My grandmother is one of three people who I never miss calling once a week, and is an unfailingly supportive person who is always happy to sit down and discuss the minutiae of life that has unfolded over the past week, to take pleasure in the small opportunities for laughs the world provides. She means the world to me, and even if she were to pass tomorrow I would never for a second question whether it was worth it.

To be sure, a lot of this is built on us having things in common to share, a love for food, a love for travel, a love for the Golden Girls, among other things. But a large part of it is built as any other relationship, where we meet each other halfway, and I try to lean into things she likes that I can also try to build an interest in, or at least appreciate her enjoyment of. To be honest I couldn't give two shits about British royalty, but watching *The Crown* with her has been

wonderful, because she's met me halfway by sharing interesting bits of history throughout, while I can concurrently appreciate the compelling cinematography. Things like this don't just fall into place, and I've found that I have to take the initiative to make things like this happen in our relationship more than I do in others in my life. But where she may lack there, she makes up in the unbounding wisdom she has to offer as someone who has seen so much more life than I have, an amazing resource that can become obscured by aging but that is often discoverable just below the surface of hearing trouble or a lack of cultural connection.

This type of relationship certainly won't be possible for everyone, but at minimum, I think people should think about the older people in their life more, trying to find their own way to appreciate all that their elders have done to pave the way for them. I'd love to see it be more normal for people to live with their aging parents and grandparents, and for the bar for people to be sent to nursing homes to be much higher. I hope we can look past the disruption of life this may bring and think of how happy it would make them, or how we might grow with them. As my grandmother mentioned, "living with your children disrupts everybody's life and makes you a burden, but you always hope". "

And even if your path in life takes you away from them, there's still so much you can do to keep up the relationship. Visits, even if quite short, are often undervalued because people don't realize how impactful they can be. Instead of imagining yourself having a positive impact just in the moments you are there with them, take a step back to realize that, for someone whose social calendar is largely empty, your visit can be the cause of much happiness in anticipation, in planning for the shared time to come. To be sure, figuring out what to do on visits can be hard, especially when physical aging leads away from being able to as easily do active things out in the world. My grandmother is no exception, and will come up with every excuse in the book to not have to go on much needed walks. But I've learned that after you accept that you'll have to do some prodding, and that you very well might get some unsavory words tossed your way if you push too far, this can be a very small entry fee into opening up a world that helps keep them healthy and opens up a wider range of things to do. In the picture beside, we are walking at the local state park, and I can still hear her swearing "This is it Tristan, you've pushed me too far, I'm NOT doing this again" as she strode back towards the car. Rest assured though, she was smiling by the time we got home, and we soon walked again. And if visits come infrequently, communication across distance is a viable option that I think many could explore. To be sure, my grandmother's technologically challenged and getting skype set up and running smoothly for her has been logistically...interesting, let's say. But putting in the time and effort to make it possible have paid dividends, a way to keep my connection with her despite where I might find myself.

Maybe some of this hit home, maybe it didn't. At the end of the day, I just hope I can encourage people to be a part of treating our older generation with dignity and with the care they deserve, and hope I can do my part of raising the call, while also hoping to highlight the beauty within.

After Death

And a larger topic than I have the appropriate time to treat here, but that I wanted to touch on, is that of what happens to a relationship after death. Much of what I've said above talks of the pain of loss, of the real inability to fill your day by spending time with this person in the way you once did, but this ignores the fact that we can choose to carry those we've lost with us, in a way that keeps us together with them in life even when they're gone. Back home, I drive by my maternal grandparents gravesites every day going into town, and while it used to be sad it makes me happy now, because this is my reminder, my way to keep them and who they are a part of me and in my life. My maternal grandmother was probably the nicest person I've ever met or will meet, and so keeping her with me crops up in interesting ways. These can vary from connecting with her while reading a book on why anger is bad and why we should move away from it as an emotion, to thinking of her kindness while watching Everything, Everywhere, All at Once and how, even in the face of being taken advantage of and mocked, kindness can be the greatest of strengths. So that's to say, think of them even when they've passed, and take solace in knowing that they can still be meaningful parts of your life, even when they're gone.

QR Code below for links and full writing on Doris:



Video Timestamps

0:00 Uh oh!

0:40 Dad coasters!

1:30 Family updates

2:30 Please don't pee during the Skype call

3:05 How do microphones work?

3:20 Me update!

4:45 Changing sheets is *definitely* in the eye of the beholder

5:15 Dancing! Aka what is bachata

6:50 Did you ever do anything with dancing?

9:50 Boring Corner geography

11:45 "After so long you don't have the moves and the jives"

12:20 Fig newtons for diabetics??

12:55 Bad diabetic Grandmother!

12:35 Farm apple sauce not up to standards

16:00 Mast General ("eclectic" store) hate speech

16:55 But Tristan, it's the "am vi ance"

17:30 What's a potbelly stove?

18:10 Local history lesson (remembering the dead in practice)

20:40 How was your birthday?

22:30 Grandmothers assessment of local volleyball team

24:00 Everybody loves sports!

28:20 Effective Altruism

29:50 Is it Friday?

30:30 Scheduling future calls

31:45 Hi John!

33:20 Connection issues and Grandma confused!

34:00 Getting tired of the Golden Girls? :(

35:40 WCYB is televising rivalry games now!!!

Doris

Doris and I's story began over three years ago, in late 2019. We met through a program at UVA called Adopt a Grandparent, which matches you with one of the people in the nearby nursing homes, effectively giving you the pretext to form a friendship with them, meeting weekly. At first I was paired with Elizabeth, but quickly she had health complications to where I couldn't see her any more, so I naturally picked things up with one of the other ladies I had met at the dinner table: Doris. Compared to pretty much everyone else there I met, Doris had a surprising degree of mental acuity, able to follow all the conversational paths we took and often explaining what was going on to the others when they got confused. It was so surprising, in fact, that I wondered why she was in the nursing home at all, learning that the only reason she was there was because her eyesight had deteriorated, making her unable to drive to get groceries anymore, and not having any friends or family in the area that could do this for her. It made me quite sad for her, mainly because she was a perfectly aware human left amongst people generally further along their own path of deterioration, leaving her to often have to stop a conversation short because the other person would get lost. And yet, over time, I realized that even this was better than the norm, as our dinner table which started with four slowly lost members to health complications and death, until by the very end, it was just me dining with Doris, leaving me to wonder how exactly the 6 nights a week I wasn't there went.

Eventually COVID came, and figuring out how best to move forward proved tough. The program did letters for a bit, and I did send some to her, but there were never any return letters, leaving me feeling a bit like Murphy in Interstellar, sending messages to someone I knew received them, but no longer if they understood or found resonance in them. In a way, I didn't know if the Doris I had come to know was receiving them, as it dawned on me that at some point, these people stop becoming the people they once were, and become someone else entirely when enough has been lost to the sands of time. Months later I tried calling, still unable to go because of COVID restrictions but hoping that this format may make genuine connection easier. But from the moment she picked up I could tell she didn't know who I was, still aware enough to be able to make conversation, but now no longer able to visualize or remember just who the person on the other end was. In perhaps the most meaningful sense, I had already lost Doris, and became honestly pretty confused as to where to go next, whether to try to keep up this one sided connection to a person, whether that was someone I could emotionally sustain, and even when the nursing home opened up again, I didn't go to see her.

That was a sad and messy end to a relationship, one I hoped to maybe fill out better by trying to return to the home and talk to Doris for a bit recently. I had called ahead and been informed that it was okay for me to come in to see Doris, and came by after work one day, a surprisingly warm Friday full of sunshine. Lead into a different wing of the home, a wing reserved for the more deteriorated residents, I began to feel like my odds were even lower than I'd hoped, and felt a drop in my stomach when I saw the person I was to sit with, and didn't know if this was a deteriorated Doris or someone else entirely, too afraid to ask point blank either. I tried to talk to her, tried to ask if she remembered, or how she'd been, but she only stared back blankly at me, no response at all, not even a grunt. I looked to the greater table she

was a part of to try to make conversation, try to perhaps understand a bit more about the person sitting next to me, but was met with more empty faces, with questionate but empty looks. I tried to connect to each, but apparently the silence was determined to hang in the air, only brief sentences spoken past each other to be had that meal. Perhaps most notably, when I asked the person next to me how her day was, all that came back was “who knows?”

I eventually excused myself, now a bit more confident that my interlocutor wasn't my friend, hoping that the receptionist might shed a bit of light. Sure enough she could: the Doris I was speaking to was a more recent addition, not even there when I used to come by. I felt many things then, but what I most thought about was what she mentioned when I was on my way back to the room: “you know, I'm sure we have lots of people who'd love to have your company”. It hurt because this fact wasn't lost on me. I knew this to be true, but had become an exemplar of the category I critique: someone with so much stuff on my perpetual list that I just “couldn't” find the time anymore.

I returned to sit down for a bit longer with the previous party I had been grouped with, and honestly just felt a bit dejected, my party no more apt to engage. The background was a constant “Hma Hma Hma Hma Hma”, the only thing it seemed the lady next to me could say. It served as a constant reminder of what was already quite present and hard to ignore: our mortality, the slow loss of self that comes as we age which eventually reaches a point where little is left to identify us with the personhood we crafted for ourselves throughout our lives. Not all was somber though and I did get to see a bit of a beautiful moment, the tender care of one of the nurses there. All either unable or unwilling to consume much food, she one by one helped each of them bring a spoon to their mouth, talking with them a bit while she did it too. She was able to keep them grounded by reminding them of some of the facts of their lives, but also was quick to sort of play the game with them and just sort of roll with whatever they had to say. As she told me later, “sometimes you just have to go with the crazy”, something which represented a new way of looking at connection with those further down the path of mental degradation. I'm still not a fan of nursing homes, but this reminded me that not everyone that works there is soulless and calloused to the plight of the residents. Some still find ways to care even through tougher experiences than I feel like I could navigate, and this experience highlighted to me the idea that there is probably a lot of wisdom contained in some of the more compassionate workers in nursing homes. We would do well to try to learn from them as we set off on a journey to care for those in our own lives.

I left my name and number with the lady at the desk, in case she found anyone who could shed some light on where Doris may be now. I haven't got a call yet and I'm not really expecting one, I think it's just something I have to make my peace with. I just hope I didn't become another person she hoped to see each week, only to be let down again and again. I just hope that she could find some solace in our time spent together and the conversations we had. I just hope she's happy and loved, wherever she is now.