

GROWING OLD TOGETHER

Fairytale or Myth

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In Isabel Allende's novel, *A Long Petal of the Sea*, which I just finished reading, Victor and Roser live through the terror of the Spanish civil war, flee to France, become refugees in Chile, and then, after a coup and Pinochet's rise to power, flee again in exile to Venezuela. After all those years of uncertainty and danger, they finally settle back in Chile to enjoy, at last, a simple life together. Then Roser develops cancer and dies. Their dream of "growing old together" ends. Victor tries to find a new life for himself.

This hit me as my own life changed last November, 2019, when I moved my wife of 59 years into memory care at Aegis Living in Seattle. It was not a death, but in many ways like one. I had to live on my own, and we could not share our lives together as previously. I emptied our big house, prepared it for sale, and bought a new condo in Ballard. The old house sold. This involved over two months of time-consuming work and concern. I finally settled into my own small condo.

Living alone was a new experience. I had to find new friends in Ballard, a new neighborhood, learn new housekeeping chores and how to cook for one. I would visit Betty daily at first, and then every other day – that was hard and emotional. I was beginning to become comfortable in this new life when a big disaster hit – the coronavirus pandemic.

Things changed again for me. I could no longer see Betty in person, only talk to her by phone. Recently she asked, "why don't you visit me?" I replied that I couldn't because of the quarantine. She replied, "oh yes, I remember." It is hard to talk to her, particularly when I can't see her.

In mid March I began "staying at home" under our Governor's orders. Well not exactly. I escape for daily two-mile walks in the neighborhood away from the center of Ballard, but have my groceries delivered – I will not take the risk of going into a grocery store with lots of other people.

During this time I have developed a much closer relationship with my daughter, Krista, who lives in the Bay Area. She flew up to Seattle three times: in November, December, and January. That was a Godsend! She was here when we moved Betty into Aegis, to see Betty and me just before Christmas, and to help me move into my condo in January. Without her help I would not have survived. We talk regularly by phone, but we have not seen each other since the pandemic; that's tough!

My son, Matthew, who lives here in Seattle with his wife and two kids, has helped – my grandson delivers groceries and other things I need – but I have seen none of them in person since the quarantine. We talk on the phone occasionally.

I have not talked to anyone in person since the quarantine, with only a couple exceptions. Last week on a walk, I met a friend of mine walking her dog. We stopped and talked, masked and six feet apart, for five to ten minutes. That was great, and made my day. And a day or two later I drove up to Everett to bring something to a friend. He and his wife live in a retirement home there and are restricted to their small apartment. His wife met me in an open doorway, six feet apart and masked. I was quite surprised to see and talk to her.

As I walk through my neighborhood I see other people, some walking alone, with a partner or as a family, others working in their yards with children at play. It all seems quite normal, but it isn't. I live alone except for my cat, Igor. I talk to him a lot, but he has only one thing to say, "meow, meow" (feed me, play with me). Without him I don't think I would survive. I greet him in the morning on the other side of my bedroom door; it is good to see another living being as my day begins.

This morning I broke down and cried, for no good reason, or perhaps for many reasons. It is hard to be alone – others have a spouse, partner, or other family members living with them or nearby, who they regularly see. Eating alone, particularly at dinner, is difficult for me. We have evolved to live communally, that's our normal condition. I'm not sure I can live without that community. How long can this situation last, and how long can I last? I know it won't be forever, but it seems like it.

I hate to leave this on a negative note. To get back to my first point, few of us "grow old together." My father died at age 74 and my mother at age 93. They loved each other dearly while they were together. One of a couple will always die first, the question is which one, and how long will the other one live alone? That, I guess, is life.

Meanwhile life goes on. Things always change. For the better, I hope.