

Retirement Matters

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SPECIAL CHRISTMAS EDITION



A taxi journey with a difference



Many years ago I worked as a taxi cab driver. One time I had to pick up a passenger in the middle of the night. When I arrived at the address, the building was dark, except for a light in a ground floor window.

Many drivers would wait for a couple of minutes and drive away in such circumstances. But I thought of passengers that might need my assistance. Therefore I always went to the door and knocked. So I did the same this time too. I heard a weak voice of an elderly woman: *"Just a minute"*. The door opened and I saw a small lady in her 80's, wearing a dress and a pillbox hat. She had a small suitcase in her hands. So I took the lady's suitcase and helped her to walk to the cab. *"Thank you for your kindness"* – she said. *"It's nothing"* – I said. *"I just try to treat my passengers the way I would want my mother treated"*. *"You are a very decent person."*

When we got into the cab, she told the address and asked: *"Could you drive through downtown?"* I told her, that it was not the shortest way. *"I know, but there is no rush, as I am on my way to a hospice. I have no family left"*. I noticed tears in her eyes.

I quietly switched off the meter and asked what route would she like me to take. While we drove through the city, the old lady showed me the places that were important to her: the building where she worked as an elevator operator, the house where she and her husband lived just after the marriage, the warehouse, where was a ballroom many years ago, so she went dancing there, when she was a young girl.

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A taxi journey with a difference (continued)

After two hours of driving she silently said: *"I'm tired, let's go now"*.

As soon as we arrived at the address she gave me, two orderlies came out to the cab. They seemed to be waiting for her. I took the lady's suitcase, while she was seated in a wheelchair. *"Tell me, how much I owe you?"* she asked. I said that she owes me nothing. *"But you have to make a living"*. *"There are other passengers"*, – I replied and gave her a hug. She held onto me tightly. *"Thank you for giving me those moments of joy"*, – she said.

When I was walking to the cab, I heard a door shut. I thought to myself that it sounded like closing of person's life.

That day I did not pick up any more passengers, I just drove without any purpose, lost in thoughts about the old lady. What if she had gotten an angry or indifferent driver, who was impatient to end his shift? I seems to me that this drive was the most important thing I've done in my life. We always look for a great moments, but sometimes great moments catch us unaware, beautifully wrapped in what might be considered as nothing particular.



Suicide – a silent cry for help!

When young and newly married, I was a Voluntary Police Reservist at Greenwood Park Police Station, in Durban. Saturday evenings were extremely busy in some suburbs, and we were sometimes seconded to other areas, which were experiencing high crime rates (mainly due to the aftermath of imbibing and partying). The nature of such crimes were seldom serious and normally comprised of public disturbances, assault and minor opportunistic crime - caused mainly by the excessive consumption of alcohol.

However on one such evening we were assigned to the Durban Beachfront area, and during our shift, we were summoned to an incident area where a person was threatening to jump off the roof of a 10-story, South Beach, block of flats, near Point Road. (At this stage of my life, I was young and immature, had little knowledge of the psychology of suicide, and scant sympathy for self-harming individuals. Our 'shift' finished at 10h00 and, at that time, we were scheduled to drive back to the suburb in which we were stationed, and resided).

Arriving at the scene of the incident at about 20h45, I attempted to persuade the suicidal victim to come down off the roof and relinquish his disturbing behaviour - but apparently to no avail. I was standing amongst the crowd of spectators at street level, as he refused to allow anyone to come up to the heady heights on which he was positioned. The majority of spectators appeared to view the incident in similar fashion to *Saturday-night movies* - that is, apart from a few understandably, very distraught friends and family members!

I

had to shout loudly, above the hullabaloo of sigh-seers (many of whom were intoxicated), in order to make myself heard! Our efforts seem to be making no progress, and concerned that we still had to return to the local police station to 'clock-off' I eventually shouted to him... *"If you are going to jump... do it soon, as we have to go off duty when our shift finishes in 20 minutes time!"* Fortunately for him (and me!), he didn't jump, but came down off the roof-top, and exiting the building - accompanied us back to the local police station.

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A considerate farewell

I was working as the CEO of TAFTA (The Association for the Aged – a non-profit organization caring for the elderly) and one morning in the late 1990's, on arriving at work, I was summoned to the 6th floor of Kings Hall, our Head Office in Aliwal Street, Durban. There I was handed a suicide note from Mrs. Jones. My distraught staff took me through to her bathroom, where she lay in peaceful repose on the floor. She was wearing a new *nightie* and had placed newspapers on the floor, prior to securing a plastic bag over her head with an elastic band.

The note apologized for any inconvenience her chosen manner of departure may cause us. And went on to explain why she had decided to end her life. She was in her 90th year and, after suffering from a number of debilitating disease for a few years, had recently been informed that she now additionally also had heart problems. But the punch line was the last sentence which read... *And please can you get someone to defrost the fridge.* The note was amongst the most touching that I have ever received!

What consideration! Here was a lovely, rational lady, who because euthanasia was illegal, had been forced to end her life alone in her flat instead of in the comfort and company of her friends. And how considerate of her to remind us of a housekeeping chore with her last written words? If ever there was an example of a rational well thought out *departure* – this was it! What an example of the merits of euthanasia and reminder of the sadness of forcing people to go it alone?

Henry Spencer

Dear Mr. Spencer,
and TAFTA staff, I am very sorry to do this to you, but it has nothing to do with anything that TAFTA has either done, or not done. I am riddled with cancer; I am stone deaf and my eyesight is very bad. I have coped with these problems for several years. However about three to four weeks ago I suddenly developed heart trouble, which I have never had before, and my health has deteriorated since then. The slightest activity gives me palpitations, and my legs are swollen, so I can see a lot of trouble ahead. I am in my 90th year, so I have had a good innings, and think that it is now time to quit. I have always been interested in voluntary euthanasia, but we can't have it in South Africa, so I did it my way. I am very grateful to TAFTA for all that they did for me, and I wish you all good fortune in the future.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs. J Smith

PS: Please don't forget to get someone to defrost the fridge

Suicide – a silent cry for help!

At the time, I was young and stupid (some might claim that the latter still applies!), and I later realised that my callous approach could have had disastrous consequences. But at the time, I was unaware that many suicide attempts are actually *cries for help*, and that my unthinking suggestion, could have tipped him over the edge - both figuratively and literally! So the lesson that I learnt from my experience was...
'always treat suicide threats, or attempts, as a cry for help - and act accordingly!'

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Henry Spencer

Our attitude to death - or, isn't it time?



I have never quite understood the attitude of the majority of people to death? Most formal religions maintain that 'Heaven' (or by whatever name you call it), has streets paved with gold, free golf club membership, with *Mars Bars* hanging from the branches of all the trees in the 'rough' (And possibly even free flying lesbians?), yet... whenever a person is dying, acquaintances who have not even bothered to visit for ten years, enter their rooms clad in sombre black suits, clutching white lilies, and whispering inanities, supposedly intended to comfort them. But, if Heaven is such a grand place – why not bounce in, clothed in jeans and a T-shirt, clutching a bottle of Brandy and say to them ... *"Good on you mate! You are on your way... let's drink to that!"*

In the 1990's whilst working as CEO of a retirement facility in Durban, I experienced the following example of family interference (however well meant?). A 96-year old person had expressed the wish to die! He lay in a semi-fœtal position on his bed, in one of our frail care homes. On a few occasions, over a period of only a few months he contracted pneumonia, and his family immediately rushed him across the road to *Addington Hospital*, where he was pumped full of antibiotics.

A week or so later, after recovering, he was returned to his bed in the frail care home. This process was repeated on three occasions. On the fourth occasion the Sister-in-charge of his ward, quietly called his family aside and advised them against again sending him to the hospital. She explained that he wanted to die; that he was ready to die! And that they should allow him to do so, with peace and dignity. She went on to tell them how pneumonia was known as '*old man's friend*', and that he would likely die painlessly in his sleep. Thankfully they heeded her advice, and he died a few nights later, as she had predicted.

The pre-occupation with keeping people alive at all costs, in many cases, denies the elderly the right to a dignified death. Our ancestors, often recognising that a loved one's time to exit the departure lounge had arrived, had allowed the process to proceed in a practiced - almost ritualised manner.

My mom came from Afrikaans farming stock, in the Northern Cape, and as a young boy, I recall on one occasion we learned that her elderly brother, *Oom Jan van den Berg*, was dying. My mom and I caught the train to Vryburg and travelled to Reivilo where the entire family were camped on a "*Nagmaal*" square outside the Church. The family had gathered to say goodbye to him. He inconveniently recovered (without medications or a physician's skill *), so our lengthy trip from our home in Durban had been in vain, however I recite the story to illustrate the principle of a ritualised and accepted death, impossible on the roller coaster of modern medicine and an obsession with life.

* He did die a short while after, but at least we had the opportunity to bid 'Oom' Jan farewell, as was the custom of the day.

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Our attitude to death — or, isn't it time? (continued)

So what should we aspire to?

The following process could prove effective in returning to a more dignified and peaceful death:

- Firstly accept that getting older and dying is an unavoidable and natural part of life.
- Seek medical assistance in the early stages to identify the morbidity risk.
- If the ailment is curable – undergo treatment.
- In the event that no treatment is available, by all means pray to God to ask for a cure. But remember God does not require MRI-scans, X-rays, '...oscopy's, surgery and all the other paraphernalia to cure you. He will simply prescribe medication from a bottle labelled miracles.
- If terminal, accept that your time has come; that you are about to die... and prepare for the event – for example put everything in order for your surviving spouse; do your good-byes, relax, have a few cap-puccinos (or perhaps something even a little stronger?) and wait for the departure announcement.
- Take as much palliative medication as you need. Woody Allen once said that he ...” *doesn't mind dying – he just doesn't want to be there when it happens.*”

And remember if you adopt this approach to death, the people most likely to experience pain, will be the Medical-aid administrators and Medicos, who after your funding ceases, may have to forgo their annual vacation to Hawaii?

“Isn't it time that we reverted to this proven and practiced method of dying?”

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Henry Spencer

Funny Old Goat



A group of Americans was travelling on a bus tour through France and were in the Loire Valley quite near to the town of Sancerre. They stopped at the nearby village of Chavignol and visited a cheese farm where the world famous 'Crottin de Chavignol' goat's cheese is made. Their guide, who was the farmer's wife, led them through a process of cheese making, explaining how goat's milk was used.

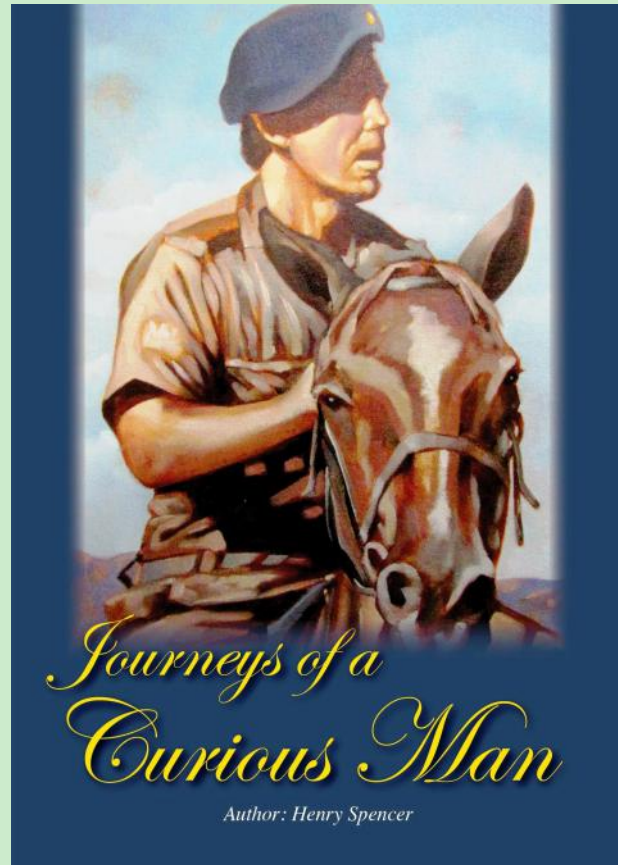
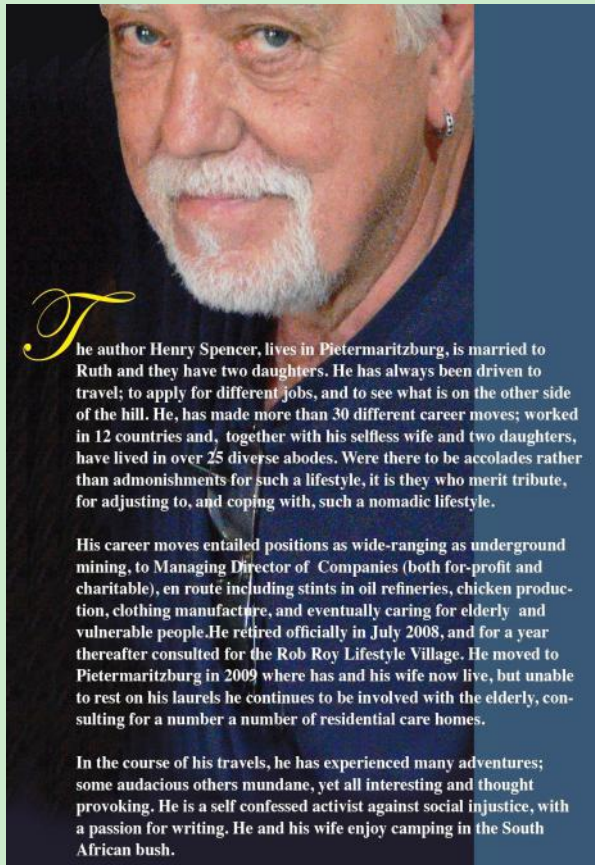
Madame showed the group a picturesque hill-side where many goats were grazing. These, she explained, were the older goats put out to pasture when they no longer produced. Madame

then asked, turning to the group, 'What do you do in the USA with your old goats that aren't producing?' One spry (and very quick) elderly gentleman answered, 'They send us on bus tours.'



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Books to read

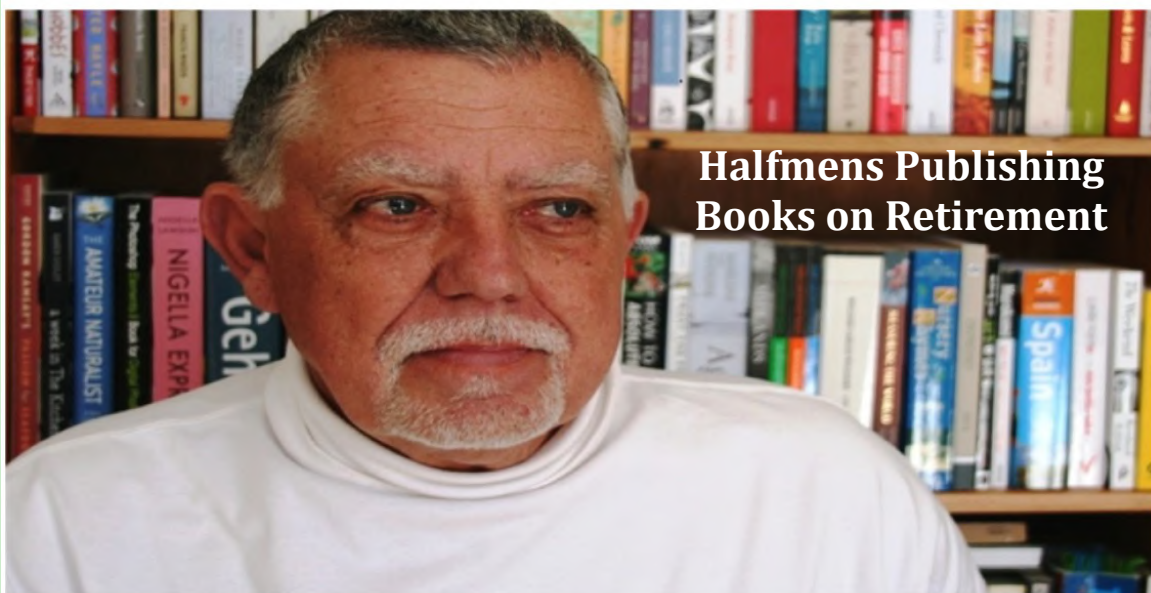


This book is available from the author, whose contact details are:

For ebooks - www.henryspencerauthor.com

For hardcopy (in South Africa) - halfmens@telkomsa.net

Or, telephonically on 027-72-514 0913



Retirement Matters

There are no free lunches!

(... or you get what you pay for!)



While I am aware that for many in our country, the price of retirement accommodation and care facilities is becoming unaffordable, I am concerned at the increasing number of enquiries I am receiving from adult children, seeking to place their ageing parents/relatives in care centres - but unable/not wishing to contribute financially to the costs thereof themselves!

In 2021 it was calculated that the minimum running cost of a care centre, providing professional frail care was in the order of R17,500 per month. yet I regularly receive enquiries from family members, who expect the State to pick up the total bill for their relatives care - expecting the State pension, and State Grant to cover all the costs.

Why is the cost of care becoming unaffordable to working class families?

We now live longer than was previously the case - as a result we outlive our funds and pensions.

This increasing longevity means that the adult children of parents, are themselves at retirement age, with their own financial concerns.

There are today fewer children. In 1800 each family in developing countries had. About 7 children. Today this figure has fallen to below 2.

The globalisation of the working environment means that adult children need to be mobile... consequently they are often forced to move from pillar to post... thus maintaining a family home, in which parents could remain safely ensconced, is a thing of the past.

Who is actually responsible for frail care fees, and costs?

The parents themselves.

Their children (but they would need to be sued by the parents themselves ... a very unlikely occurrence !)

What can you do to lessen your cost of supporting elderly family members?

If your parents do not have sufficient funds to cope unaided, then the follow should perhaps be considered:

Do they still own a house, in which family members are perhaps residing? Sell it, or take your parent home to live with you.

Share the cost of care between all the siblings; but appoint one family member, agreed to by the care centre resident, to act as a spokesperson/to oversee the arrangement, as few organisations would be prepared to deal with all siblings.

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Henry Spencer



Fulfilling a duty does not only benefit the recipient of your help - more importantly it benefits the person performing the duty, and ...

Remember one day that elderly person seeking assistance may be you!

Santa's Special Assignment!



Christmas is supposed to be a season of celebration and joy - but is it really?

Having worked in the field of elder care, for over two and a half decades, I am concerned at the loneliness experienced by many elderly people staying in care centres and 'old age homes'. One observes them sitting alone; in wheel chairs, staring sadly, silently out of windows - often upon bleak and barren landscapes... and on such occasions I am always reminded that quality of life is far more important than the quantity of years we live.

Medical science is increasingly able to extend human life - but to what purpose – to sit alone despondently, in an alien environment, amongst people that you might not normally choose to be with? For many this is surely akin to solitary confinement of the severest and cruellest form? In South Africa the problem is exacerbated by the Diaspora, as children of all cultural groups increasingly emigrate to greener pastures such as the UK or Australia, often leaving their elderly parents ensconced in prisons of pseudo-compassion. While their loneliness and suffering is often ongoing, for some, it must seem worse during the festive season? Well, put yourself in the shoes of some elderly residents *abandoned in old age homes*... They are often beset by disabilities, illness and pain; have fewer visits from friends (as many have already departed for that *Golf Course in the Sky!*); have become isolated by their decreased mobility... and most of all really miss their children and grandchildren.

And then along comes Santa, the *silent assassin*! They sit alone staring out of the window, but hear the cacophony of joyful laughter, as the more fortunate amongst them enjoy visits from family and friends. They observe gifts being exchanged and family groups gathering to enjoy celebratory lunches together – some are even fortunate enough to be taken out to lunch; or even rarer, amazingly to spend hall-mark holiday periods with their families. For a brief time the sombre atmosphere of the care home, is momentarily transformed into a joyful scene of activity and children's laughter... But not their grand-children! For them the silent solitude and loneliness continues.

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Old shoes and new friends

New friends are like shoes... with some it takes a while to feel comfortable - while with others the fit is immediate. But no matter how good they may initially feel, isn't it strange how on long journeys we still pack our old shoes or slippers; we still prefer our old friends... just in case things get uncomfortable?

Henry Spencer

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Santa's Special Assignment! (Continued from previous page)

Nostalgic memories often provide painful reminders of previous pleasure and consequently; when current experiences fall short of yesteryear's joy, perhaps they merely serve to add to the sorrow and disappointment of those left out of festivities – the lonely and unvisited.

So what can we do to alleviate the sadness and pain that a number of residents experience during the festive season?

Contact a care centre or retirement facility near you, and find out:

- Which residents have no immediate family or friends?
- Who are likely to be alone over the festive season?
- Who are likely to be sad and depressed?
- Who may need cheering up?

Then, visit them over the festive time; hand-deliver a Christmas gift. Many residential care homes put on Christmas functions such as school choir renditions, parties, and even Christmas pantomimes and nativity plays, but these are normally only transitory in affect! Homes also receive donations of gifts for their less affluent residents... but nothing beats one-on-one, personal interaction!

You can make a difference! Do what you can to thwart the damage done by *Santa the silent assassin!*... always remembering that one day the person being assisted may be your loved one – or Heaven forbid! ... Perhaps even you!

"There is nothing sadder in this world, than to wake Christmas morning and not being a child."

Erma Bombeck

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Henry Spencer

What can you do to help lonely seniors this Christmas?

- Start volunteering at a local Retirement facility (But be careful not to interfere ... help staff rather than hindering them!... And remember that those staff that you encounter on Christmas day, have sacrificed the pleasure of being with their own families, in order to help those living in the facility!)
- Offer to take lonely or isolated residents 'home' for Christmas dinner.
- Adopt some of yesteryears Christmas habits - one's with which they will be familiar, and which will create nostalgic moments for them.... for example 'tickeys' in Christmas puddings; pulling chicken breast-bones and making a wish, small presents in stockings etc.
- Take your allocated senior to maybe even visit a friend of his, who he has not seen for a long while.
- Take them out for a meal, or even away on a short holiday.

Small tokens, gifts and favours can have a large impact on their happiness, at this (for some...) very lonely time!



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Emma Barter Victoria



138 Years of
service to
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Tips on celebrating the festive season with a person who is living with dementia



Do you have a relative, friend, or even patient who has dementia - if so, with the festive season ahead... think of this! How are you going to, and should you involve them in the Christmas Season, and accompanying festivities?

Here are some tips to assist you in what can be an important, yet difficult time:

Firstly Christmas may well be one of the few things that they remember well (and even enjoy). It has been my experience that many people with dementia,

especially in its latter stages, often revert to their original language, and preferences. Once, round about Christmas day, whilst working near Bristol in the UK, there was a knock at our front door. On opening it we discovered an elderly Polish lady, who addressed us in her original home tongue – even after she had been working in the UK for over 20 years. (Fortunately she was well-known in the suburb as a person living with dementia, and we were consequently able to contact her family, who collected her).

So here are some tips intended to minimise their stress (and indeed, perhaps even enhance their enjoyment):

- Should you involve them? Of course you should! They remain human beings, and as such deserve to join in the festivities (if they so wish)... or to at least have the opportunity to decline.
- Play traditional Christmas Music, ideally in their own mother tongue. I.e. if they are of German ancestry – try to play German Hymns and Carols.
- People with dementia often dislike change - so put up the Festive decorations slowly... and in the event that they start to become agitated, try to guide them to a quieter section of the accommodation. (Even have a pre-prepared quiet area to which they can retire if needed). Use old family decorations from yesteryear - ones which have been in the family for years, and to which they may be accustomed.
- Try to avoid a situation in which too many people are gathered in too small, or a confined space.
- Stimulate nostalgic conversation and reminiscences.
- Play hymns not modern day choruses, whose rhythm and words hardly fit the accompanying tunes.
- Avoid flashing lights and other visual disturbances which may upset them.
- Encourage guests to arrive in a slow orderly fashion, in order not to overwhelm them, with mass greetings.
- Make collages of old family photos in which they may appear.
- Bring photos of old friends of theirs.
- In the event that any of their original favourite items or presents are still available, make them available to your loved ones.
- Ensure that noise levels are not excessive... conversations coupled with loud music and conversations can be overwhelming.
- Play old fashioned classic films on TV... for example '*Gone with the Wind*; *The sound of Music*' etc.
- If they had a special friend in their younger days... perhaps try to invite them.
- It may be wise to share behavioural guidelines with friends and family members, prior to them meeting your afflicted love one.

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Tips on celebrating the festive season with a person who is living with dementia (continued from previous page)

Here are three special tips for Christmas celebrations:

Remember that just because you do not understand their language, doesn't mean that the converse is true.

Allow them the freedom of choice i.e. if they seem to be averse to the occasion, allow them to withdraw... do not force it upon them.

And finally similar to us, no two people living with dementia are identical. They are all individuals, so be prepared and willing to adapt.

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Henry Spencer



ZOOM and WEBINAR FATIGUE

With the advent of Covid I find that I am becoming more and more resistant to ZOOM meetings i.e. those meetings where face-to-face encounters are replaced by plastic screens and keyboards; where even though the participants may be thousands of miles away from each other, the miracle of modern technology seeks to replace the benefits of personal meetings with plastic handshakes, and remote hugs. So, if you have to engage via ZOOM, here are a few tips to make them work:

1. Always have an agenda
2. Schedule regular breaks... say at least one every hour
3. Better still - keep the meetings short. Limit them to an hour
4. If you haven't shaved or changed out of your pyjamas, hide the view of yourself... turn off the camera... and remember other attending the ZOOM meeting can see what is going on in the background, even better than you - so save altercations with partners or spouse for later
5. Don't multitask, as it can create the impression that others present are not important
6. Record the meetings and make the recordings available to those who were unable to attend, or who have perhaps merely had enough of remote meetings



The old man and the Christmas tree



*The silent old man sat alone in the dark
Next to a cold hearth without flame or spark
The Xmas tree stood depressingly stark
In the dark corner - he shared with the tree
'Twas friends and children - he had hoped to see
Now living alone - 'tis company he sought
To whom will he give the presents he bought?
A bottle of wine and ribbon wrapped soap
So with sad silent sigh - he thinks of the rope*

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*On dust adorned leaves - hang old Xmas lights
On moth-eaten branches - cold crooked candles
Threaten to topple - to fall to the floor
As hopeful blind eyes - look to the door
Will children arrive - with greetings and hugs?
Will they bring presents - warm coffee in mugs?
But three hours later - devoid now of hope
With tear trickling down - he picks up the rope*

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*No half eaten biscuits - nor glasses of milk
Stand 'Neath the tree - to greet the red silk
Baubles and beads - the only reminders
Of the laughter of children - playing keepers and finders
He's now all alone (his wife having died)
With no one to talk to - no one to chide
He's had his last supper - devoid now of hope
Alone 'neath the tree - unable to cope
He fashions a noose with a long piece of rope*

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Henry Spencer

Very depressing .. but sadly sometimes true! So what can you do to alleviate the loneliness and sadness of some seniors this Christmas?

Cynicism is a gift



Once a salesman was trying unsuccessfully to sell me his products. As he stood up to leave, he turned to me and said ... "You must be the *Worlds greatest cynic!*"

To which I responded by saying... "*Thank you I will take that as a compliment.*")

The word cynic is often used in a disparaging manner, when in truth it should be taken as a compliment. For those thus termed, should be viewed as visionaries - people who see through the lens of life's microscope more clearly than do those who peer through the rose-tinted, frosted lenses of optimists!

Cynics are often able to discern the devious guiles of those intent on manipulating circumstances to suit their own needs; to their own benefit.

They penetrate facades and, and sometimes they are even capable of unpeeling the skins of respectability and philanthropy - and by so doing, are often able to uncover corrupt cores!



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Henry Spencer

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retirement matters*
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HENRY SPENCER
Positive-Ageing Consultant & Writer



Wise sayings to inspire us (more or less)

1. When one door closes and another door opens - you are probably in prison.
2. To me *"drink responsibly"* means - don't spill it!
3. Age 60 might be the new '40', but 9: PM is the new midnight.
4. The older I get, the earlier it gets late.
5. When I say *"The other day,"* I could be referring to any time between yesterday and 15 years ago.
6. I remember being able to get up without making sound effects.
7. I had my patience tested - I'm negative.
8. Remember, if you lose a sock in the dryer, it comes back as a Tupperware lid that doesn't fit any of your containers.
9. If you are sitting in public and a stranger takes the seat next to you, just stare straight ahead and say *"Did you bring the money?"*
10. When you ask me what I am doing today, and I say *"nothing,"* it doesn't mean that I am free today. It just means that I am doing nothing.
11. I finally got eight hours of sleep. It took me three days, but whatever.
12. I run like the winded.
13. I hate it when a couple argue in public, and I missed the beginning and don't know whose side I am on.
14. When someone asks what I did over the weekend, I squint, and ask, *"Why, what did you hear?"*
15. When exercising and doing the 'squats,' are your knees supposed to sound like a goat chewing on aluminum can stuffed with celery?
16. I don't mean to interrupt people. I randomly remember things, and just get excited.
17. When I ask for directions please don't use words like *"east."*
18. Don't bother walking a mile in my shoes. That would be boring. Spend 30 seconds in my head... that'll freak you right out.
19. Sometimes, someone unexpected comes into your life out of nowhere, makes your heart race, and changes you forever. We call those people cops.
20. My luck is like a bald guy who in a raffle just won a comb.

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Source unknown

