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THE WITNESS

**Retirement:
First Class or Steerage?**
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**Idolatry and Promise
of the Church**
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Old Isn't a Problem

Concern for the elderly has resulted in an increasing professionalization of those who care for the old. This professional concern was expressed by the title of a recent conference convened by a major midwestern university: "Frontiers In Aging: Life Extension." The 700 participants were caring professionals from all the disciplines that help the aging.

Having been asked to speak to this group, I immediately consulted my mother-in-law. She is 81 years of age, comes from a Lithuanian background and lives in an apartment near our home.

We call my mother-in-law Old Grandma. She likes that because she believes it makes her an authority.

When I told her that a

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conference called "Frontiers in Aging: Life Extension" was about her, she shook her head. She couldn't imagine they were talking about her because their language is of a different order than the words Old Grandma knows.

Words like "frontier," "aging," and "extension" are about *going, becoming and moving forward*. Old Grandma doesn't think those words relate to her life. To her, old is *being*. When Old Grandma says "old," it isn't good or bad. "Old" is like saying she's a woman. It is a condition, a state. To her, old is something that is not associated with problems. A problem is how to get the janitor to get the steam heat up to the right temperature. But old isn't a problem.

For Old Grandma, old is:

- finally knowing what is important
- when you are, rather than when you are becoming
- knowing about pain, rather

by John L. McKnight

- than fearing it
- being able to gain more pleasure from memory than from prospect
- when doctors become impotent and powerless
- when satisfaction depends less and less on consumption
- using the strength that a good life has stored for you
- enjoying the deference
- worrying about irrelevance.

Old Grandma's "old" cannot be counted. Therefore, people who count things will never know about her old. They are trapped by the tools of counting. The economists, social scientists, census takers and actuaries are closed out of her world because they don't count what counts to her.

Old Grandma wonders about the problem of people who have a conference on "old." She thinks there is a problem with people who think old is a problem.

not the system, like Sunday, made for people?

Perhaps the problems of the elderly will clarify for all of us just how the system works. The elderly way of life caricatures our system as a whole. The rich are richer, the poor are poorer; and scholars spin theories about the normal aging process and social disengagement. To repeat, how old would you be if you didn't know how old you were. It depends largely on your class status. You are only as old as you feel. True, perhaps, but it is probable that you will feel younger if you are upper class, and your going will be more comfortable.

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