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My remarks this evening will include more personal references than usual because they and what they express illustrate in the best way available to me the point I want to make about life in the later years. I have the advantage of experience as I address the topic. As a child, I lived in the same house as a grandparent, and at twelve years of age saw her die suddenly of a heart attack. As a son, I observed and in the last years assisted elderly parents as they reached the end of their days. Now I have reached the magic age 65 when we must wear the senior citizen badge if we have not pinned it to ourselves before. I am now the grandfather, not the grandson. I am the father of adult daughters and sons who in a few years will observe me in retirement, interested, I hope, in my new life and how I am living it. I have lived long enough to know life in many of its stages and if my life would end tonight, I would consider myself blessed for I have lived longer and experienced more than 98% of all humans in times past.

My experience is standard for today. It was for the majority in my parent’s day. We look to retirement as a stage in life; some embrace it eagerly, others with the concern that comes with change. This way of perceiving life’s
later years is new in the human experience, and its recent evolution has brought us Porter Hills and other retirement communities.

Given the number of people over 60 in our society and in Europe, we might expect to find considerable historical literature about older people and the way they have lived over the centuries. That is not the case. The literature is contemporary, relating to the psychology, health, and sociology of aging. Yet some knowledge about older people in the past, and their place in society is known to us. China revered the older generation and Confuscious laid down rules concerning the elderly. Old men commanded obedience and respect. The father had the right of life and death over his children, and the patriarchs’ authority did not lessen with age. Chinese often pretended to be older than they were to earn deference. Old Age was the highest level of life and a virtue in itself.

In ancient Greece and Rome, laws gave authority to the older citizen. In some cases, dealing with disagreements between parents and sons and daughters, the judge had to be 60. I wonder if Franklin Roosevelt’s court-packing scheme derived from this ancient practice.
The first “nursing homes” were built by the Catholic church in the 4th century. These asylums or hospitals were for the orphans and the sick. The aged are not specifically mentioned, but if you lived long enough illness was likely to send you to an asylum. Poor families, and they comprised the vast majority, could barely support children. The old, infirm were sent away. Through the Dark Ages, approximately 450 to 1450 in Europe, into the 19th century, little attention was given to growing old. I suppose that is not surprising since nearly everyone was dead by age 55, and there were times when at least half the babies born died in infancy.

There were exceptions to age neglect. In the Massachusetts Bay Colony families were legally, as well as morally, responsible for the old people. Our country was earlier than most in planning for life’s later years. The number and variety of private institutions for the aged exploded after the Civil War. Two thirds of the 1200 benevolent homes operating in 1939 were founded between 1875 and 1919. From 1790 to World War I, laws were passed to enforce family obligations to aged relatives. Yet pension plans were few and unenforceable. An aid for elderly pension plan passed in Arizona was declared unconstitutional.
In the great depression, conditions forced action on behalf of people faced with financial and social ruin. The aged were among them and the Social Security Act gave everyone hope. After World War II with life expectancy increasing, with affluence permeating more layers of society, as a larger percentage of the total population became older, retirement years opened to new opportunities for personal fulfillment, good health, intellectual development, fun, and long life.

Fifteen years ago our family crossed Lake Michigan on the ferry from Ludington to Wisconsin. Driving south towards Chicago we stopped at the farm house my grandfather and grandmother built near Cedar Grove, Wisconsin, on a bluff about a half mile from Lake Michigan. The house was deserted and dilapidated, but I remembered it. As I wandered through the rooms, stories about life in that house told to me by my father returned to my mind. In addition to the parents, my grandparents, there were eight sons, two daughters, and their paternal grandfather living there. My dad was given his grandpa as a special assignment. The old man had outlived three wives, and though he was affluent for his day, he had to turn to his son and daughter-in-law for care in his last years. Thus, my father ran errands and kept his
grandfather company. I am named for my great grandfather, a sign of the bond that developed between them. As I entered my great grandfather’s room, I remembered my dad telling me about his grandfather’s last months. They were months of suffering, mostly in that room, without the care available today or relief for the family that the care affords.

When I was three years old, my mother’s father died. He, too, had made a good living. He saved and looked forward to comfortable years. The depression “wiped him out” and he died at 63 years of age. My grandmother came to live with us. A Dutch immigrant, orphaned at age six, she was devout, cultured, sociable, and strong-willed. I grew up thinking that every house should have a grandmother. To this day I know homes that have one, and it works. What I didn’t know at the time was that raising children, meeting the social and professional responsibilities of a college President’s position, and keeping a marriage happy was demanding enough for my mother. Though grandma was helpful, she could be difficult, and of course, my mother had to be mediator. She had to keep in balance the needs of her husband, her children, and her mother. She did remarkably well, but her experience made her grateful for Porter Hills, never suggesting or wanting to live with us.
Moving to Porter Hills did not come early in my parents’ old age. In the late 1970’s I began to suggest Porter Hills to them. They let me know they were capable of independent living, believing, I suppose, that independence diminished if one moved to a retirement community. One day in the early 1980’s, Nancy and I returned from Europe to find them moving into Porter Hills. I was pleased and curious. My mother’s long bout with a stiff neck and shoulder, and a flaming kitchen curtain as she prepared breakfast, tilted my father towards Porter Hills and she tilted with him.

When they settled in I am sure they wondered why they hadn’t done so years sooner. It was instant success. And what was the nature of that success? Friends from one’s early years always have a special place, but opportunities to make new friends or develop acquaintance into friendship at different stages of life brings stimulation and enrichment. Porter Hills stimulated and enriched them with new friends. They liked to help people, and they liked to advance life through organizations and institutions. Porter Hills offered them opportunities within a contained area. They were not exhausted physically while they were challenged and fulfilled as they always had been. Their last years were filled with the feeling and knowledge that they belonged to a
community. They never lacked a feeling of belonging for their church, family and Hope College provided that, but Porter Hills gave them a daily dose of community the way they liked it. Of course the library, the beauty parlor, the dining facilities all made life easier and pleasant. Family and friends came to them or they to them. They truly lived more independently in old age than any other arrangement could have provided.

In due course, they each came to the end time. Trained staff, trained in matters of health and in matters of the spirit, assisted them and us. My father left first. No one could ask for more caring support than my mother received from friends and staff at Porter Hills. My gratitude is enduring. I thought again about my great grandfather with little relief from the physical agony, and my father two generations later. Both were surrounded by loving families, but the care of both patient and family were light years apart.

I mentioned that affluence and longevity have changed our view and understanding of what old age can be. I suppose education is a factor too. That helps the mind range and investigate without a professional imperative in later years, adding enjoyment and stimulation. The growth in number of old may have driven people to a new vision for life, but in the 20th century it
also became a social and health care problem. What were we to do about this new phenomenon in human experience? One of the institutions that took it seriously was the church. The church in the 4th century laid the foundation. The church in 20th century America has taken the nurture, the shelter, and the care of the elderly to its highest human level. The government and private entrepreneurs are in the business, but none surpass what the church initiated in the quality of life and continued improvement.

This evening I am particularly interested in the mainline Protestant denominations and their work in the field. Porter Hills Presbyterian Village and Clark Home are as good as you will find anywhere, and there are many similar ones representing the commitment of church people throughout the nation. I think mainline Protestant denominations may be the leading institutions in care for the elderly. Perhaps that is not surprising since they are filled with better than average educated people and the culture and economics that characterizes such a group. I am going now to make a controversial statement, one I have not researched enough to claim for it absolute validity. I believe the development within mainline Protestantism of institutions for the high quality of life for the elderly is the most effective,
original, and far-reaching work they have done in the past 25 years. For me, personally, as I have explained, it came at the right time. It has for hundreds of thousands.

Church members moved aggressively and successfully in this important field while another disconcerting development was taking place. Between 1968 and the late 1980’s the Presbyterian Church declined 10.3%, the Episcopal Church 16.9%, the United Methodist Church 11.4%, and the United Church of Christ 13%. It may be validly or invalidly extrapolated, I don’t know, that a membership loss isn’t surprising if you are doing great work at the end of the tunnel, but not enough at the entrance. The loss of membership can be necessary or unnecessary; it can be argued. We know for certain that belonging to a church is no longer as socially important as it once was, and the number lost by decline in social importance has not been offset by increase in numbers of people who are inspired by its mission and message. I have a hunch that the mission is carried out better than the message is often articulated. Maybe paring back to those who are committed will put churches in “fighting trim.”
As they analyze themselves and decide on which fronts they will concentrate, they should look at their ministry of care for the aged. There they not only wanted to give and help, they looked at a social problem and participated in the redefinition of a whole stage of life. They not only reacted, they created. I don’t know how or why, I have only observed that it happened.

Christians are always interested profoundly in the end days of life. Their actions in the retirement game speak loudly of this interest, and point to the way they should do all their work in the 21st century. Mainline Protestant Churches may find a source of inspiration and a guide to renewal in what they do for older people. I have a vision for mainline Protestantism, but that is a topic for another discourse.

You have now listened to an articulation of my thoughts about the importance and meaning of Porter Hills Presbyterian Village, at least as I understand that importance and meaning. First: Porter Hills represents a creative move in the ministry of the Church. Second: Porter Hills symbolizes a redefinition of old age. Third: Porter Hills represents changed conditions of living for the aged. Fourth: Porter Hills makes life happier and easier for
people like it did for my parents, and therefore, made it happier and easier for me. and Fifth: Porter Hills and places like it are an inspiration and a model for the church’s ministry in the 21st century. I don’t know whether or not you agree with these concepts, but that’s a passel of concepts to go through my head about Porter Hills in one week, and I enjoyed sharing them with you.