Palliative and Supportive Care

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Pandemic ageism

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Essay/Personal Reflection

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Her eyes are milk-flecked and filled with fear. "The television says I'm expendable, that I need to die so the young can live, so the country can survive." She is an 82-year-old retired nurse with a mild case of COVID-19. She laments that in her years as a youth, the aged were venerated for their wisdom and contributions to society. "However, it seems we're disposable now." She grabs my arm tight. "Please, give me a chance to live, to offer what meager contributions remain in my mind and body." Her voice is desperate. "God knows I don't want to be responsible for a 20-year old dying, but … " No one wants to die, but no one wants to cause the death of another. Fortunately, the COVID-19 numbers are declining at the hospital. I tell her not to worry, her wishes will be honored. But her fear is real. Intensive care algorithms favor the young, especially when resources are limited. And the country has seemingly acquiesced to sacrificing the old in a rush to propel economic recovery. The comments on social media, television, and elsewhere are callous. There is no sense of communality; instead, there's brazen pandemic abandonment.

"I did what I could to limit my exposure, but I guess it wasn't enough. The ambulance driver chastised me. 'Get your groceries delivered,' he said. I felt like an irresponsible child." My shoulders slump, my head bows. Fat tears fill my eyes. She notices. She adjusts her oxygen tube and pulls herself up with the bedrails. "Don't you worry, I've survived cancer, flu, wars, floods, and hurricanes, and I'll be damned if this virus is going to write my epitaph." Her lips twist into a smile. She pats my arm. She is providing comfort to me. I am humbled, but it is what her generation does; they give, they provide, they support.

We sit in shared silence, the rhythmic cadence of the heart monitor the only sound. I think of the uncertainty of life. The adversity and losses. The hardships and heartache. Still, we do not throw our arms into the air and succumb to death. We live, we breathe, we smile, we laugh, and yes, at times, we fight, no matter our age.

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