

Village life

Three Stories About Living
in
A Retirement Village in Early 1990s

by
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for
Stories of Ageing Workshop 1998

1. A Ship of Widows
2. Nobody Ever Asked Before !
3. Caught in a Category, BUT !



*Nothing Should be More Expected than Old Age :
Nothing is More Unforeseen !*

Simone de Beauvoir

A Ship of Widows

by Ruth Crow, May 12th, 1997

From 1990 to 1995 I lived in a Retirement Village. The Village was actually a four storey block of 96 self-contained flats and included a dining room and spacious social facilities..

I knew the administration of the Village had a reputation for being rather conservative, or some may say oppressive (1). Despite this I decided to live there (2). The deciding point for me was the flat roof, with views to north, south, east and west.

The roof was like a ship's deck and I enjoyed promenading the deck at sunset each day. I, privately, called the Village a SHIP OF WIDOWS (3).

I soon found that the rules were not the only form of oppression. The building design fostered supervision and this combined with management practices, meant that the villagers had no threshold...there were no in-between-spaces separating public and private spheres of the villager's lives. For example there was no street number, (I was told my address was "The ... Village), we had no letterboxes (we collected our letters from the "office" at a certain time each day); the receptionist used a number to identify us, (we lost our personal names); the entrance to our homes was a door onto a corridor with a number on it, no place for a name (we lost our sense of arriving "home").. Moreover, the management could see all comings and goings through the only entrance foyer. At first, I felt rather overwhelmed by the possibility of losing my identity.

Despite this I really enjoyed living at the Village. It was a challenging, social-learning time for me. I had to relearn my skills in community relationships.

It is necessary to pause here and state that, during all my adult life, I have been involved with a great variety of community organisations, this has meant continually making deliberate efforts to mix with all sorts of people. However, going to live at the Village introduced quite different elements into my knowledge of community relationships.

Village life meant more frequent mixing, both formally and informally, with the other villagers than I had been used to in my former neighbourhood; feeling that certain social behaviour was expected of me; recognising that the villagers had their code for acceptable behaviour and that the management had another. In other words, there was considerable, constant pressure "to fit in"; but there were two sets of values.

In practice the Village population was more homo-geneous than the usual suburban neighbourhood. Firstly, even though there was a wide age range of villagers most tended to regard themselves as "old".(4). So there was homo-geneity in attitude to life's stage. Secondly, nearly everyone had been born in Australia.(5).

Nevertheless it was not "white, protestant and Anglo Saxon"

2/3 - write 1 (green)
18. (Blue)

1 confd.

"A Ship of Widows" by Ruth Crow, page 2.

....its predominant ethos was "white, Roman Catholic, and Irish Celtic".(5)

At this stage I have to admit that my four grandparents were from Scotland and were staunch Presbyterians. In adult life I have tried to overcome the religious prejudices I inherited with my mother's milk, and, in later years, to overcome other prejudices developed in response to the political dogmatism of some of the Roman Catholic Church leaders and the sectarianism of some political groups to which I have belonged. However, it was not until I lived at the Village that I began to realise the damage that such prejudices reck on every-day cultural relationships.

My years at the Village taught me to begin to appreciate the contribution that Irish migration has made to Australian community life. I learnt that body language is one way of answering oppression. Secondly I learnt to appreciate the value of a sense for the absurd, and thirdly I learnt to use every day political acumen (such as protecting each other by at least two approaching any authoritative person). These lessons may seem to be just common sense; but this common sense had not been nurtured in me. I found that the descendants of the Irish migrants practised it unwittingly, but with superb skill.(6)

Reflecting on my years at the Village helps me to have a deeper understanding of the significance of developing Australia as a truly multi-cultural nation. There is a popular trend to regard multiculturalism as passively enjoying the singing, dancing, cooking and other obvious contributions to public life...my years at the Village helped me to see a more elusive, private side to multiculturalism, ...to appreciate more fully that part of the answer to oppressive conditions is the process of continually, creating community relationships. How can these innate skills be used to further the aim of Australia as a multi-cultural nation ?

Footnotes

1. The rules were a list of what the villagers must NOT do... (Do NOT leave your flat unless fully dressed...)
2. For me, the advantages of living at the Village were its location in a familiar neighbourhood, the north facing flat and the affordable rent,
3. There were about 75 single women (mostly widows), about 5 married couples and, perhaps ten men (mostly bachelors).
4. The ages ranged from mid 60s to late 90s... a range of over 30 years.
5. The Village was not run by the Roman Catholic Church. The majority of Villagers were not members of that church. However, the Village had a higher proportion of Roman Catholics than the general population. Rituals such as the Rosary and Mass were the only religious practices on the Village premises.
6. Most of the people I am writing about were born in Australia. Their Irish migrant descendants came to Australia two or three generations ago

A STORY ABOUT FEELING POWERLESS, May 1990.

Nobody Has Asked For One Before.

(With Appreciation of Oliver Twist's Feelings)

Ruth Crow 14/5/97

My north facing room was full of sunshine. The tawny chrysanthemums added just the right sort of homeliness. I was really pleased with how I managed to arrange my bed-sitter so that the three of us could chat in comfort, I was so pleased I had chosen to wear my new dress.

Then the expected knock. "Mrs Crow, meet Mr Blank. He is the Administrator for all our retirement villages. As you know he is here to admit you."

"How do you do. Would you like to sit down?"

"No, ^{thank you} we haven't time. We have others to admit today. We just want to make sure you know the rules so that you can be admitted. Mrs Black, please read out the rules to Mrs Crow."

"Number 1. Residents will keep their flats clean and tidy and free from rats, mice, silverfish and other pests. Do you understand, Mrs Crow? Number 2. Residents should be fully clothed before leaving their flat; that means that you are not to wear slippers or dressing gowns in the passage way. Is this clear, Mrs Crow?...."

"Now, you sign here Mrs Crow, and Mrs Black will also sign. Good, you are now admitted to the Retirement Village. You are now one of us. We hope you will be very happy here".

"Thank you, I am sure I will be happy, but I would be happier still if only I had my own letterbox.

"But nobody has ever asked for a letterbox before !Has anybody ever asked Mrs Black?"

Suddenly the sun went behind a cloud, the chrisssies looked wilted, my cushions seemed faded and I was sure my visitors thought that my dress came from the op.shop.

1. Rules and regulations as read out by Mrs Black are available on requestt.

Caught in a Category .. BUT !

A Story About "I am a Little old lady, but..." *

Stories of Ageing

By Ruth Crow, June 15th, 1998

The Retirement Village described in this essay still exists, but as a result of an Inquiry in the early 1990s, the management policies have been radically changed. Also as a result of a general improvement in provision of residential accommodation for elderly people there are, now, probably no Retirement Villages similar to it. Nevertheless some forms of patriarchal, bureaucratic management are practiced in some Villages and are likely to re-occur, from time to time, in most institutions.

I remember the day that a four year old girl visited the Retirement Village. She looked around the lounge room and exclaimed "What a lot of grandmas ! What a lot of dear, little, old ladies !"

When I went to live at the Village in 1990 most of the women acted as if they enjoyed being dear-little-old-ladies. This role seemed to be imposed on them by the Village staff, their own families and the other residents. It was re-enforced by the neighbourhood shop-keepers, the community bus driver and the concert party emtertainers and to a lesser extent by those responsible for the Senior Citizens Club, and the Neighbourhood Centre and even by the "lady on the school crossing" !

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SELF IMAGE OF A DEAR-LITTLE-OLD-LADY

Accepting dependence, even delighting in it :- *I'm so lucky, my daughter looks after my banking and everything I don't have to bother about anything. ***

Fearing the world beyond the Village and expecting such fears to be shared by other old people :- *The streets are now dangerous. I wouldn't dare go out to the corner shop alone, and as for going out when its dark...*

Enjoying passive, entertainment regardless of whether it is racist, sexist, ageist, mediocre. *I like concert parties. I like listening to their old fashioned songs, and I get a good laugh from their jokes, sometimes they are rude, its a bit like the old Tivoli.*

Avoiding recreation which may challenge the intellect, even rejecting games at which they have had some skill. *I do look forward to bingo every Tuesday, I used to play euchre, (scrabble, monopoly, trivia pursuit) but I can't be bothered now.*

Expecting to spend long hours sitting in a community bus when on an "outing", *I'll just sit in the bus and look at the view, I can't be bothered getting out until we get to the hotel for lunch... We're too old to want to walk (on the jetty... along the walking track to the waterfall etc)*



3 contd

2.

Expressing gratitude even when disappointed in the service provided, *What does it matter if we start late for the shopping trip, We are so lucky to be able to go. ****

WHEN IN ROME DO AS THE ROMANS DO !

Before I shifted to the Village I knew that it was managed in an old-fashioned, patriarchal way. I sensed that, if I was to live there and survive as a social human being I would need to modify my behaviour, otherwise I would alienate myself from the other residents. I imposed restrictions on myself.

CONFORMING TO THE CATEGORY OF A-DEAR-LITTLE-OLD-LADY

I walked sedately around the Village

I never ran for a tram... well I only ran when I knew nobody from the Village could see me

I sneaked out and sneaked in very quietly when I went out at night ****

I sat passively and applauded the entertainers, even the singing of "Two Little Girls in Blue" and "One Day at a Time" sung by concert party after concert party..

I went on the community bus trips to the country-side and to the beach but on such outings had little opportunity of enjoying being out-of-doors

I waited for the community bus, uncomplainingly, for anything up to 30 minutes, to go shopping.

I smiled my welcome to the bus driver, endorsing the welcome the other residents gave him, despite the time he had kept us waiting.

I played bingo and a couple of times was the bingo caller, gaining considerable prestige amongst the residents and being much less bored during the game.

I politely averted my eyes when I stood in a queue to receive my mail, thus demonstrating that I was a polite dear-little-old-lady !

BUT, BEYOND THE VILLAGE I WAS NOT A DEAR-LITTLE-OLD-LADY

My family, relations friends, neighbours and acquaintances knew me as the person I had always been and expected me to continue to be part of their networks. And I was, and still am ! Actually, I participated in more effective ways in some of these, and in addition, I was able to participate in networks, which were developing around some emerging issues which were new to me. Thus, so far as I was concerned, living at the Village coincided with an enlargement of the community with which I could network.

3 contd

One of my reason for choosing to live at the Village was that I was seeking a way of life which would give me more time to pursue the community interests which were attracting me at that stage in my life. The Village fulfilled this expectation. *****

Thus, during my five years at the Village I lead a double-sided life. I was not the only one who coped in this way. My day to day experience helped me to look at how other residents were affected. I distinguished three main ways.

THREE RESPONSES TO BEING CATEGORISED AS A DEAR-LITTLE-OLD-LADY.

1. The majority of Village residents seemed to accept the prevailing expectation and adapted the behaviour of a dear-little-old lady. The Village was their home and they no longer "bothered" to relate to the world beyond.
2. Some lead a double-sided life, in some ways similar to the way I coped. All of these had maintained their strong networks beyond the Village.
3. Some showed that they rejected being categorised as dear-little-old-ladies, but as they lacked strong links with networks beyond the Village they had no escape. Such women alienated themselves from the majority and thus spent long hours in isolation in their bed-sitting rooms.

It is useful to contemplate why the majority of women accepted the role of being a dear-little-old-lady. One factor could well be that the shift to the Village severed their links with community networks. They were thus totally dependent on the Village for their social life. In addition, there was the living example of how, those who rejected being categorised, tended to isolate themselves in their bed-sitters. For those who had no effective support systems beyond the Village there were only two choices :- be a dear-little-old-lady and enjoy Village life, or spend your days in isolation. For a minority there was the third choice :- a double-sided-life, such as I lead. This third option was only open to those who had effective support systems beyond the Village. The majority of Village residents felt compelled to

be dear-little-old ladies.

It is saddening to remember the fate of those "non-conformers" who confined themselves to their bed-sitters. I have a very definite impression that some of these residents died earlier than was necessary. I knew several who recognised this themselves.

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I WAS INDEED VERY FORTUNATE TO BE INVOLVED IN CHANGES AT THE VILLAGE WHICH TOOK PLACE AFTER AN INQUIRY WAS HELD IN 1991. I WAS SORRY TO LEAVE THE VILLAGE IN 1995.

I REGARD MY 5 YEARS AT THE VILLAGE AS BEING ONE OF THE MOST CREATIVE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES OF MY LIFE.

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* This story complements two of the stories I wrote in 1997 "A Ship of Widows" and "Nobody Ever Asked for One Before !" and the first story I wrote in 1998, which I called "Food for Thought". Reports, newsletters and photos of this period at this Village are in the Crow Collection at the Victoria University, Footscray Campus. These documents give detailed information about Village life before, during and after the changes that took place as the result of an Inquiry in 1991.

** The word bother was a buzz-word at the Village. It was mainly used by those who excelled at playing the role of a dear-little-old-lady..

*** .On a typical 4 hour trip there could be 2 hours of travelling and about 2 hours in a (viewless) hotel. On all bus trips the driver (a male) condescendingly expected a welcome, no matter how late the bus was, thus showing little consideration for time wasted by residents.

By the way it is strongly claimed that community buses are a form of public transport, giving residents of Retirement Villages access to the community, and thus there is no need to consider siting the Village close to shops and public transport etc. It is seldom recognised that access by community buses is a one-way-access. This system does not give visitors to the Village access by public transport..

**** The nocturnal walks from the tram were extra stressful as I was afraid that if I did "meet trouble" my evening adventures would become known to the residents, vindicating their warnings, and isolating me as a reckless fool.

***** I made a sudden decision to shift to the Village, when by sheer accident I found out that I was eligible for such accommodation and that a north facing flat was available. The smaller flat, the change of location etc enabled me to slightly alter the direction of my community involvement. Before Maurie died, in 1988, he and I discussed what was the best way I could contribute on the issues we were both concerned about. We decided that the first step was to relinquish some of the organisational responsibilities we had had in some North Melbourne groups. My shift to North Carlton in 1990 consolidated this decision. The shift from the Village, in 1995, was necessary as the Village was located too far from the Victoria University of Technology. I now live within a short bus trip to Footscray.

SPECIAL NOTE :- An Appreciation of Maria, the Visiting Hairdresser.

Finally, a special tribute to the hairdresser who visited the Village each week. When I first went to the Village the hairdressing was carried out in the four cubicles of the toilet which had been installed for use by visitors, thus rarely used as toilets. After the change in management she had a much more dignified salon area.

Everyone looked forward to Maria's visits. On these days some of those, who had chosen to isolate themselves in their bedsitters, came down to her salon. Role playing seemed to stop in Maria's presence. All residents were important people to her. I think her magical contribution was mainly due to her genuine interest, what each resident was doing and her complete lack of prejudice on age, sex, and race.

SO, SPECIAL THANKS TO MARIA !