

Elderly people, a wisdom school

Names of retirement home residents have been changed.

I'm convinced Bill's main delight in life was exasperating the staff at his retirement home. Out of sheer stubbornness, he rejected nearly everything that they said would be beneficial to him.

He refused to wear his hearing aid, choosing instead to let his voice boom throughout the building all day — sometimes he talked so loudly that he scared me right out of my seat.

Bill wouldn't wear his false teeth either, or his glasses, for that matter, so he was difficult to understand at times, he was a mess when he ate and his eyes didn't focus properly. And he didn't shower as often as he was supposed to, so sometimes he smelled.

Regardless, I could hardly get enough of him. The man could make me laugh like very few other people could. Somehow his care-free, bullheaded attitude was a breath of fresh air. He was constantly reminding me that conformity isn't everything, that sometimes compliance doesn't make sense.

Bill was the kind of guy who made me love and appreciate elderly people a little bit more every time I got to be around him. A lady named Nellie had a similar effect on me.

When I think about Nellie, the first thing I think about is a slow pace. She was steady and deliberate, with a routine so relaxed that it was almost unsettling. For me, this took some getting used to. In fact, almost every time I

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visited Nellie at the nursing home, I had to spend the first few minutes trying to get myself out of a hurry.

It didn't take too long, though, because sitting and talking with Nellie was a calming experience. Surrounded by family photos in the little room that was her home, I always felt like Nellie had all the time in the world for me. It made me feel valuable, and maybe even a little envious.

Here was somebody who had some really important things figured out. While others earned money, won awards and made themselves busy, Nellie knew how to live well. While people like me had schedules that were crammed to the breaking point, she managed a dependable life with large spaces of time carved out for family and friends.

In many ways, this elderly lady's life was less than what people strive for these days, but it was also much, much more. There was nothing fancy about her, nothing that would show up in the evening news or the tabloids, but she had simplicity and peace, and it was beautiful.

In general, people today don't spend a lot of time in nursing homes or retire-

ment villages. Unless we have a parent or grandparent to visit there, most of us "young ones" stay away most of the time.

One of the main reasons we keep our distance, I think, is that being around elderly people makes us think about where we're headed. We start to wonder how long we'll be around on this planet, and how well we'll be toward the end.

These thoughts and wonderings aren't always comfortable, so we avoid them. In the process, though, we miss out on some of the best lessons life has to offer.

People like Bill and Nellie have taught me things that I would have never learned in conversation with a 30-year-old or a 50-year-old. No, their level of perspective and clarity comes in much later years.

So I have to ask: How long has it been since you hung out with an elderly person? When was the last time you stopped by to talk to your great aunt, your spouse's uncle, your aging neighbor? They have wisdom to offer that you haven't even had the chance to learn yet.

Sure, you might develop it on your own eventually, but isn't it better to let the Nellies and Bills of the world share a sneak peak?

Winning At Home, Inc. is a nationally-known organization designed to assist and encourage people of all ages and stages of family development. Dan Seaborn, founder, wrote this article in conjunction with Winning At Home's staff editor Lisa Velthouse. E-mail your questions or comments to hometeam@winningathome.com.