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IN MY OPINION

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It's Hell to get old

I have a pet peeve. It's people who think it's inconvenient to take care of their parents when they get old and need help. A man actually said to me once, "All my mother has is Social Security and she could starve to death." I wanted to say to this factory worker, who was earning more money than most of us, "What's the matter with you? You're her son, why don't you take care of her?"

Incredibly enough, he thought the government, not he, was responsible for his mother. I've talked to grown children who resent having to spend their parent's money on nursing homes and health care, because then they won't inherit it. I've talked to grown children who worry about their parents living alone in their homes — but it doesn't dawn on them to share their homes with their parents. The proceeds of the sale of a house would support an elderly person for a long time.

I grew up with my maternal grandmother living with us from the time I was four until after I left for college. My other grandparents lived across the street. My maternal grandmother became a widow in 1920 and died in 1956. She worked until she was 70 years old, but there was no retirement plan, no pension, no Social Security. She was bright and intelligent and didn't like being dependent after all those years, but she needed a place to live and to be fed.

It was probably not easy for my parents to have another generation in their home for so many years, but Grandma was in good health and active, cared for us children and helped with household duties. It was not until the last few years that she needed special care.

My parents are both living and 93 years old. Their goal, apparently, was to make sure they would depend on no one. Fortunately, they planned well and have the resources to be physically cared for but they live in Sarasota, Fla. and it's hard to be so far away.

I have my own ideas of what I'm going to do when I get old and infirm, and those adjectives are marching toward me with great speed. When I started my freelance writing career in 1989, I thought about the day when I might not be able to move anything but my fingers and I will still be able to move them over the keyboard. And I can write at home.

And home will be somewhere with other people. This business of clinging to one's own home forever doesn't appeal to me at all. Give me a bustling apartment building any day, so I won't be lonely and isolated. Renting an apartment can't compare to the cost of homeowners insurance, property taxes, home maintenance, high utilities — even if my home is bought and paid for.

I have a friend whose mother really got ancient and she liked to drink. She sat in the corner of her son's home when he had company (and even when he didn't) and just drank and smiled. Now she was happy and content and at the age of 90something, no one was concerned she was ruining her health. My mother told me once that her doctor prescribed a pill that could be addictive, but they both just decided — who cares?

Retirement communities and assisted living have become good alternatives to a nursing home. It's amazing to see the facilities for older people that have sprung up in Galesburg over the last ten years. It certainly indicates the need for such housing and the growing population of older people in our area. It isn't going to get any smaller.

I really don't want to end up living with my children, either, but they have assured me I will not be left out in the cold. That's nice to know.

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