

The Language of Eldercare

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The poet Ingeborg Bachmann stated aptly that a new world requires a new language. In order to move away from the idea that human beings are biological objects in decline that can be manipulated, objectified and thus "commodified", we need to make a change in the language used to describe aging, old age and elder care. Foremost, we need to become aware of the gain-loss paradigm that permeates our culture. Given we equate aging mostly with human biology, it is easy to look at the changing body and observe losses: inability to run as fast as in earlier years, less vision and hearing, forgetfulness, and so forth.

The story of gain and loss can be replaced by a more complete viewpoint, one that does not interpret what it thinks it sees but rather stays with the phenomena. For the phenomena themselves speak a language of their own. They simply express: we are changing. Without a measurement stick and standard, all we truly can observe is that we are a body and mind in process of change. It is our interpretation that wants to either make it good or bad, desirable or undesirable, define it as gain or loss.

Who is to say that we do not need exactly the changing body to help provide the ground for our deepening? That we need to go more slowly so we can live more wisely? That bone-density needs to be less dense in order for us to be more accepting? That muscles need to be softer so the mind can think more compassionately?

After thousands of years of pondering, we have yet to understand the relationship between body and mind. What we have learned is that it is increasingly more difficult to know where one ends and the other starts. Moreover, it is important to remember that words such as body, mind, and soul are only roughly pointing to something we have yet to understand, let alone define.