

Get Me To A Nunnery: A reflection on ageing in two different cultural contexts, the Nursing Home and the Religious Convent

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Abstract

When considering the experience of ageing it is not long before the themes of home, belonging and identity emerge in the discussion. Based on collected narratives this article looks at a group of older religious sisters in Ireland and explores how their particular personal and cultural contexts influences how they perceive and experience moving away from a convent where some of them have lived for 70 years. Their communal migration contrasts with that of lay people moving to the nursing home, which is usually experienced alone and unaccompanied. The article draws on a qualitative research project conducted in Ireland and Australia which critically reviews the increasing marginalisation of older people in a postmodern society. The data demonstrate that the experience of 'home' and 'belonging' and 'identity' in the two types of institutions differ markedly from each other. In terms of communal living, the convent inhabitants comprise of a cohesive group that enjoy long-term relationship and continuity of life and purpose. In contrast the aged-care institution is a contracted environment where identity and relationship are at best an individual concern but are generally seen as subordinate to a biomedical model of care.

Key Words: Older age, ageing, nursing home, home, identity, belonging, narrative, community, ritual.

1. Introduction

This article draws on personal histories collected through narrative inquiry and reflexive methodologies to explore two distinct experiences of leaving home in older age; that of residents in nursing homes and of religious sisters in an Irish convent community. Using qualitative methods I examine this experience through bringing personal stories into community and into dialogue, choosing to privilege the voices and knowledge of older people themselves over dominant professional and medical voices which often claim power over them. In this paper the voices of the participants are widely used.

During the process of address (the interview) I asked fundamental questions of the research participants about the nature of home: where it is,

how they construct it in older age, and how they view their present place of living in relation to their personal understanding of home. The process started with the gentle inquiry, 'Tell me about your home' and from here, the place of the question, I was taken to the 'there' of home – sometimes a material place, often a metaphorical place, a remembered place, a far away place, and for many, a place that no longer exists. I reflected on the question, 'If my home is far away or no longer exists, where then am I living?' I reflected on this because this is sometimes the experience of people who live in what we call (paradoxically, I often think) nursing 'homes'.

I reflected on this too because, as a migrant, I have lived far from home and I have felt the tug of the home-place. I knew intimately the unfixeness and yet the certainty of the place called home: the place that is not here where I dwell. As sometimes occurs in qualitative research the horizon of the researcher intersects with the horizon of the participant¹ and this was the case with the nursing home group who were often lonely and isolated and living away from family and friends. I came to perceive them as exiles from home. Unlike the nursing home residents the religious sisters were able to take their family with them when in older age they were obliged to leave the familiar place they called home. These connections and these differences drew me to a closer examination of the experience of home-leaving in older age.

2. Living in the Cloisters

I interviewed five sisters from a religious order and explored with them the themes of place, home and belonging in relation to their particular circumstances. The women I interviewed were the older sisters from the community and the longest residents of the convent house which they had joined between the years 1933 and 1951 at an average age of about 18 years old. While they had been some time away from the house on alternative postings (in Ireland and the USA) they spent most of their lives here. All worked as teachers in the local primary and secondary (high) schools.

Their convent had become depopulated mainly due to sisters passing away and a lack of new vocations amongst young women in modern Ireland. The old convent house, therefore, was to be sold and a new smaller house to be built nearby. I became interested in the story their going from the old convent. I wanted to mark it in some way both for them and for myself. I was interested to look at their responses to this move from home to a new place (not yet home) within the materiality of the life and relationships they live. I wanted to look at how they adapt and cope and I was interested in how their situation might be the same and different from that of lay people who find themselves experiencing a similar loss, being obliged to move from a loved home-place in older age.

In talking with one of the sisters, Grace², about the impending move she equates it with another “little death” stating, “I always think that all the little partings along the way are little deaths”. She refers specifically to the deaths of her parents and friends. From her rational mind she states, “Sure look it, we have to leave everything sometime. That’s what I feel. I mean when we die we have to leave it”. And from her faith identity, “We have not here a lasting city”. Therefore, she concludes, “it is best to try and accept it. Try and accept what...is being given to us”. Here Grace articulates her faith perspective and also a sense of sacrifice which typifies the perspective of female religious - ‘a particular form of surrender ...heroic and public’.³

This aroused my interest with regard to levels of agency and passivity and choice in respect of moving home in older age for both the lay and religious I spoke to. I will even say that I was concerned that this move was being imposed from an anonymous provincial leadership who, Grace assured me, “will take care of the business end of things, and that’s good for us”. I understood from Grace too that nobody (apart from architects) had been to talk to them about the move, that is, to process the personal or emotional human impact of such a move late in life. This is something that I have been concerned with in relation to older people, grounded as I am in my own subjectivity: my training as a counsellor, and my ways of relating and learning. I wondered how the sisters were dealing with the experience.

3. Attachment to Place

It was clear from talking to the sisters that they had a strong attachment to place, “You would be very attached to where you have been for 70 years, as I have been here for 70 years now, you know”(Grace).

This building is part of yourself. I feel sad about leaving it having been in it for all those years... I might like to finish my life here, you have a longing for your old places and happy memories (Elisabeth).⁴

Asked if there is anything she would miss, Bernadette⁵ simply stated, “Yes. We’ll have very small rooms compared to what we have here”. Space seemed to be an issue for others too. Grace was also concerned there would be less room to move around in, and Elizabeth mentioned losing some sense of space and privacy. Grace is very fond of the small chapel, admitting, “I’d hate to lose it... I really love that little chapel, do you know”, quickly adding, “but you can’t bring it with you”. I noted a certain lack of concern about what was to be left behind reflected in Brigid’s⁶ statement, “The only thing I’ll bring is my bed. Not another thing”.

Tuan writes, ‘When people deliberately change their environment and feel they are in control of their destiny, they have little cause for nostalgia.’⁷ and similarly,

when a person feels that he himself is directing the change and in control of affairs of importance to him, then nostalgia has no place in his life: action rather than mementos of the past will support his identity.⁸

This positioning seems to me to ring true but, of course, for the sisters the ‘sentimental longing for times past’ – as nostalgia is defined by Chambers dictionary – was perhaps not yet an issue. They had not yet left their home behind but were in the transition stage of anticipation and reflection. They are grounded in a sense of continuity within community and a deeply felt acceptance of the life they entered and have lived for so many years, and this is operating to sustain them in a time of change. It seemed clear to me that the sisters were much less on their own in their experience of moving than the lay people I had interviewed. The latter were usually taken to the nursing home by family and left behind when their relatives returned home.

In the face of their impending loss of home I could see the sisters were having conversations of hope. I witnessed a strong sense of agency and optimism amongst them and a forward-looking appreciation of the particular matters of importance to themselves, such as the familial bond that exists between them; the strong sense of belonging to an inclusive faith community; the companionship; the shared experiences and understanding that they enjoy, and the sense that they are moving forward together along the same trajectory. In terms of processing a loss, their focus was on finding personal and practical meaning in the experience, an orientation which is associated with positive adjustment to a changed situation – finding the benefit (‘silver-lining’) in situations of loss.⁹ Writing about female religious McKenna found,

They claimed “ownership” of their vocation and they claimed the decision to enter as their own. In doing so, they laid claim to a subjectivity often denied in assumptions of passivity in relation to why women of their era entered religious life.¹⁰

Similarly, the women I spoke to were clearly living a life chosen by themselves for themselves. They saw the privations they experienced as training in the life that they had taken on and saw acceptance of the life as the appropriate response to God’s ‘calling’, as illustrated in the following accounts:

*My poor father brought me.
 He was a very soft man
 but any nun he'd meet
 the tears would flow down his face.
 Someone would bring him around
 the convent
 And according as he'd meet
 the nuns
 like
 they'd stop to talk to him
 and he'd be crying
 the tears were rolling down
 his face.
 I never got home until my father was dying (Brigid)¹¹*

As an 18-year-old Bernadette had arrived at the convent the night before with her aunt, had been interviewed at 9 o'clock that night and accepted as a suitable 'candidate' by the parish priest. She goes on:

*Then the next morning
 I came down in the postulant's frock.
 My Aunty made two beautiful serge frocks
 that was her gift to me.
 She bought seven yards of material,
 black of course,
 and made beautiful ones!
 They were gorgeous!
 So I had one for everyday
 and one for Sunday.
 But then
 the Sunday one was taken from me.
 Oh yes.
 You had to
 you know.
 You had to give up a lot as well,
 you know.
 But that's only the way of training.
 It was training.
 It was nobody's fault.
 it just...
 you know,
 training. (Bernadette)¹²*

McKenna explains:

As women were not born nuns, they had to 'become' them. The transformation from postulant to nun involved a rejection of the secular world and their secular self. Moving into the convent, wearing a habit, and replacing one's baptismal name with one given or chosen were all metaphorical symbols by which the secular self was put to death and the women were 'reborn' in religious life.¹³

There is an acceptance, a hope and a determination evident in the words of the sisters that is translated into a proactive stance in relation to the move to the new house. It is not simply that the sisters are being moved over to the new house: they will *take control* of the premises, "The same work will continue. Our life is settled as it is... I don't look at it as much of a change. Just take over and take things as they come and go" (Elisabeth).¹⁴

4. Ritual

I see the religious sisters as people with few or perhaps no regrets. They will make the changes when the time comes and indeed there was mention from Grace, when I met her informally while interviewing the others, about "a prayerful departure ceremony... including a liturgy" that might be held to celebrate and mark the move. This idea finds direct echo in writing by Williams on navigating transitions: 'When we are deprived of meaningful ritual we languish with a chronic sense of emptiness'.¹⁵ Williams further writes:

Rituals and ceremony are ways of using symbolic acts to make a connection or to break a connection. They provide ways of taking connections from the unconscious and impressing them vividly on the conscious mind. The enactment of a ritual, in turn sends a powerful message back to the unconscious, causing changes to take place at the deep levels where attitudes and values originate. They cut through words and substitute direct feeling experience. They involve bodies. Aesthetics, memories, senses and feelings. They transform theoretical ideas into social experience. This is why rituals often involve a physical act: what registers physically, also registers at the deep level of a person's narrative.¹⁶

A departure ceremony will be the sisters' appropriate contextualised response to the changes that they will be navigating. I ask Grace if the planning of the ceremony has commenced and she characteristically tells me there is no need to worry about that yet, all in good time: "there's no point is there?... in a way you only have the present moment". The departure ceremony will be a personal, communal liturgical and spiritual process to 'break and make connection'. While the leaving will bring pain just as it has for many who have moved away from home, unlike those who moved into nursing homes, this group of women will enjoy two advantages. First, as mentioned above, they will design and partake in a therapeutic ritual of transition before they move. Second, this group of women is a community of individuals who will remain a community when they move. And this makes a big difference, as Brigid reminds us:

If I was sent there by myself off in an isolated place I'd feel it very much...Once you have the people that you live with ...if they weren't to come with you and you were left to go off by yourself, ah sure, that would be a different story. But we're all going in there together.¹⁷

5. Exile from Home

Many of us at different times in our lives have to travel alone, whether it is a journey of return after long absence or the various place-movements that occur through the life span. I think particularly of those lay people who have moved into aged care alone, leaving behind houses and gardens, friends and neighbours: all the materiality and connections of a lifetime. All of those with whom I spoke experienced a reluctant and tearful leaving and none had either formally or informally engaged in a ritual of transition. For each of them the move to aged care was precipitated by illness or injury, by the death of a loved one or by infirmity – that is, coinciding with situations of crisis and distress. For many the circumstances meant there was limited or no choice about the move and little if any advance planning. Such circumstances are not uncommon in relation to aged-care admissions and are found to adversely affect adjustment to the placement.¹⁸ It is a situation which can leave one homeless, psychologically stuck in the transitional or 'liminal space'¹⁹ and vulnerable to loneliness, isolation and insecurity: a condition which I propose is akin to 'exile'.²⁰

In addition, during visits to various aged-care facilities, I noted that the manifestations of emotional/psychological issues such as grief, loss and loneliness were being described by staff as 'problem behaviours' and pathologised as 'emotional dependence'. This kind of attribution marked out the features of grief as *symptoms*. In facilities I visited, behaviours such as weeping and wanting to talk to staff, and expressions of emotions such as

sadness and loneliness, were seen as being demanding of staff time – and were either given minimal attention by busy non-professional and mostly well-meaning care staff, or ignored. Sometimes they were treated (as symptoms) with anti-depressant medication.²¹ None of the facilities I visited provided professional counselling or psychological support to residents either on arrival or during their stay. In fact, studies that have shown that inadequate staffing levels result in a poorer quality of care in long-term care facilities confirm that ‘the vast majority of nursing homes do not have sufficient staff.’²² For those aged care residents living outside ‘a story of belonging’ it will be important for them to become engaged in a process of integration: a to facilitate transition from their old life to a new place and way of living. In terms of transition and ‘rites of passage’ therapeutic rituals involve a separation phase, a liminal phase and an integration phase:

In the separation phase, persons symbolically detach themselves from an earlier fixed point. During the liminal period, they enter a ‘betwixt and between’ realm that has few of the attributes of the past state, or of the state to come. In the third phase, when the rite of passage is consummated, the ritual subject is stable once more.²³

In a stable community such as the religious sisters enjoy, their ‘shared story’²⁴ and mutual understanding (horizon) provide them with reciprocal support in their individual processing of this time of change. As Murphy writes:

The memories of groups of peoples is the afterlife of their past action, as collective action. That memory lives on as the interpretative framework through which the group will act on the social world.²⁵

As a model of the way memory operates, Murphy is suggesting that it is not something of the past but of the present. For the sisters their communal frame of reference and structures, their memories and stories will support them to facilitate an appropriate liturgical ceremony, to aid their transition and to support the flow of their tears. For the lay people who moved to nursing homes, this mutuality is not present in their lives. Each one is a lone individual leaving behind a long-term home and moving to a new and strange place of living. Their loss of home is usually compounded with other losses such as of family, of function, of independence and autonomy, of privacy and choice. Most of what they had that signified home falls away and they find themselves subject to institutional imperatives where even

mealtimes and bedtimes are pre-determined. To paraphrase Parry and Doan²⁶, they are to some extent 'outside of a story', and there is not much comfort for them there.

"Well I might be days and I wouldn't see anyone". (Margaret)²⁷

"As far as I'm concerned now I'm on my own". (Stephen)²⁸

"I've got nobody". (Lorna)²⁹

Yet memory does support them too. Margaret, living in one of fifty identical units in an aged care facility depends on her memories. Regarding her deceased husband she states, "Our life together is more or less what I'm living on...the memory of it". She remembers their life and the house that he built, the garden full of trees and flowers and birds and the family she raised there. But the house is locked up now. Margaret explains, "My son locked up and I never looked back...if I'd looked back I think I would have started to cry". Because she felt she couldn't manage bringing wood in for the Winter and other tasks she didn't want to burden her sons with looking after her: "I didn't want to be a nuisance". Her family agree that the move is 'for the best'. Margaret's past experience, memories and inner strength help her to manage this new isolated lifestyle, "I grew up in the country where you more or less had to depend a lot on yourself. And I think that has helped me to cope".

Stephen, at 97 a retired farmer, came to the nursing home to accompany his wife who was infirm. A husband for 70 years, he stayed on when she died 12 months ago. The path home was blocked by his own increasing frailty and the inability or (unwillingness) of family members to provide appropriate supports. He spends much of the day alone. Sympathising with the staff, he "spares them" all he can because he sees how busy they are. Stephen adapts to a situation where there are not enough staff even to spend some time talking. He sits on his veranda most of the day looking out over the garden, waiting for the day his Lord call him to join his wife. This he admits "makes it a lot lonely". This is a place where he is on his own and he chooses to be elsewhere if only in his mind,

There's no place like home. We loved home...I'm still out there [i.e. at home on the farm] but I'm in here...my mind's out there.

Joan³⁰, confined to a wheelchair, a book always in her hand, has fond recollections of her marital home where she raised her family and where she can no longer live due to physical frailty. Joan reads to occupy her mind

but eagerly stuffs the book down the side of the chair at any opportunity for a chat. However she is mostly left alone as staff are too busy to chat. Many of her fellow residents suffer from Alzheimer's disease and are unable to partake in conversation and others are not of her acquaintance. Visitors are infrequent. There is no ambiguity in her words when she describes her unplanned and sudden admission into the nursing home as an experience of having been "thrown into a collection of strangers".

There is little doubt that these nursing home residents are living in their memories of times past: 'back there' – in a time of connection, and that this is preferable to living 'here'- a time of separation. They seem unable to adopt the same forward looking sense of agency evident in the religious sisters' transition and there are no support structures in place to assist them to do so.

6. Conclusion

Two different cultural contexts which carry the designation 'home' have been identified: the convent and the aged-care facility. The ways that these environments impact on the people who lived there and on the ageing identity have been discussed and life in the two types of institutions are seen to differ markedly from each other. In terms of community living, the convent inhabitants comprise of a cohesive group that enjoyed long-term relationship and continuity. The contrast with the aged-care environment is strongly made in the words of aged-care resident Joan when she describes the nursing home as a place where "strangers [are] lumped in together". This comparison offers lessons in the importance of planned transition to aged care, where this becomes necessary, and the use of ritual to aid transition. It speaks of the isolation and loneliness of current models of aged care institutions and the inadequate levels of staffing and staff training to deal with residents' human and emotional needs. It calls for creative responses from community, social and political resources to the long term care needs of older people.

Biographical note:

I began my working life as a teacher in rural Ireland and have continued to be involved in education, in one form or another, ever since. Moving to Australia in 1988 opened many opportunities for me and it was there I worked as a school counsellor, rehabilitation counsellor, employment consultant and university lecturer in counselling. In 2008 I completed a PhD thesis which examined aspects of the lived experience of older age. Having come full circle, I now work and teach in Ireland while continuing my research with and support of older people.

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Notes

- ¹ A J Walters, 'A hermeneutic study of the experiences of relatives of critically ill patients', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 22, 1995, p. 1000.
- ² Grace is a pseudonym for a religious sister interviewed about her life in the convent.
- ³ Y McKenna, 'Entering Religious Life, Claiming Subjectivity: Irish Nuns, 1930s-1960s', *Women's History Review*, 15(2), April, 2006 p.199.
- ⁴ Elisabeth is a pseudonym for a religious sister interviewed about her life in the convent.
- ⁵ Bernadette is a pseudonym for a religious sister interviewed about her life in the convent.
- ⁶ Brigid is a pseudonym for a religious sister interviewed about her life in the convent.
- ⁷ Y Tuan, *Space and Place*, University of Minnesota press: Minneapolis, London, 1977, p. 197.
- ⁸ *ibid.*, p.188
- ⁹ R A Neimeyer, 'Continuing Bonds and Reconstructing Meaning: Mitigating Complications in Bereavement', *Death Studies*, 30(8), 2006a, pp. 715-738.
- ¹⁰ Y McKenna, *op. cit.*, p. 206
- ¹¹ Brigid, *op. cit.*
- ¹² Bernadette, *op. cit.*
- ¹³ Y McKenna, 'A Gendered Revolution: Vatican II and Irish Women Religious', *Irish Feminist Review*, 1(1) Summer, 2005, pp. 75-93.
- ¹⁴ Elisabeth, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁵ A Williams, 'Designing Therapeutic Rituals', *Psychotherapy in Australia* 1(4), August, 1995, p.17 .
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.14
- ¹⁷ Brigid, *op. cit.*
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- ²³ Williams, op. cit., p. 45.
- ²⁴ A Parry & R E Doan, *Story Re-Visions: Narrative Therapy in the Post-modern World*, The Guil, 1994, p. 45.
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- ²⁶ A Parry & R E Doan, 1994, op. cit.
- ²⁷ Margaret is a pseudonym for one of the lay participants in the research
- ²⁸ Stephen is a pseudonym for one of the lay participants in the research
- ²⁹ Lorna is a pseudonym for one of the lay participants in the research

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