



The Futility of the Elderly

Romania, Serbia, Hungary, Macedonia and Greece

In ancient times, in some places, there was a custom to get rid of the elderly because they were considered useless to the community and a burden to the survival of the collective. It is said that it was customary to abandon old people in the mountains, so that they would die of hunger or freezing cold, or be eaten by predators.

The story goes that there was a young man who, not having the heart to abandon his old father in the mountains, decided to hide him in his house. Fearing that a neighbour might discover the deception and cost both his father's life and his own, the young man decided to hide his father in an empty barrel, in plain sight in the cellar of his house. He brought him food and drink every day and tried to keep him company as long as his daily work allowed him. But, to see his father in such a miserable state still broke his heart.

They had not got used to such an outlandish scenario when, suddenly, the situation worsened. An order from the governor of the region urged all men, who were capable of bearing arms, to join forces to fight a fearsome monster that was raiding livestock and also shepherds in a vast, deep forest, where few in the region dared to venture.

'What am I going to do now?' wondered the anguished young man. 'The raid may keep me away from home for many days and, moreover, if I die in this quest, who'll take food to my father? He'll end up dying of thirst and hunger in the cellar!'

The day before he left for the raid, when it was clear that he would not be able to avoid the situation, he went down to the cellar of the house with all the provisions he had and told his father about the situation. He also told him of his fear that, if he did not return, the old man would be totally helpless and abandoned to his fate. But the old man did not let the prospect of death, this time inevitable, frighten him.

‘Don’t worry, my son,’ replied the old man in a resigned manner. ‘If you don’t come back, I’ll willingly give my battered body to death. If you die, I’d not want to live either.’

And, before letting his son speak, he added:

‘However, I can give you a piece of advice that, perhaps, can bring you back, not only to you, but also many others in the village. As you know, the forest where you are going on the raid is the closest thing to a hellish labyrinth. Even if you manage to defeat the monster, if you get lost in the forest, you might end up starving to death or fall victim to other beasts in the vastness of that jungle. So, please, take my advice and take the black mare with you, but leave her foal in the stable with plenty of hay. When you have finished your ride, let go of the mare's stirrups and let her find her own way home, for she’ll want to join her foal again, and there will be nothing in the world to prevent her.’

The following day, after reassuring his father that he would follow his advice, the young man bade him a tearful farewell and departed with the rest of the men of the village.

They went deep into the treacherous forest and eventually came upon the monster, but failed to kill it. They did, however, manage to drive it away until the beast was lost in the deepest and most uncharted depths of the forest. Convinced that it would not know how to return from there to the farm land and pastures where the cattle grazed, they decided to call it a day. But then they discovered, to their dismay, that in pursuing the monster they too had become lost in the maze of trees, huge bushes and rocks of that wild region.

‘Follow me!’ said the young man, remembering his father’s advice. ‘My mare will lead us back to the village. I only have to loosen her stirrups and she’ll go straight home in search of her foal.’

At first, very few trusted the young man's suggestion but, left with no other choice and faced with the anguish of never leaving the forest, they chose to follow him.

After a few days, the entire group emerged from the jungle, hugging and shaking the young man and cheering him on for his brilliant idea.

'How did you know the mare wouldn't get lost, just as we were?' they asked.

'Excuse me, but I can't tell you how I knew,' he replied, confounding them. 'Perhaps ... someday ... I may be able to tell you.'

The young man returned to the village and was reunited with his father, who could not help shedding tears of joy at seeing him safe and sound again. And everything continued normally, that is if one can call 'normal' the life of secrecy and seclusion they had to lead because of such a cruel custom. This was until, at the end of summer, a severe drought wiped out all the crops in the region.

The community could not harvest a single grain of wheat, oats or barley, as the trees has withered and the fruit failed to ripen on their branches. People would have to survive through the winter on the stocks accumulated in the years of plenty, but what would become of them all when spring came and they had no seeds to sow? What would become of them all the following winter, with empty cellars and barns?

The young man told his father what was happening outside his confined underground world, he told him of the concern expressed by everyone in the region: what would they do when the next winter came?

'Don't worry about that, my son,' said the old man calmly. 'With the last snows of winter, or when the first rains of spring fall and the roads become soft, take the black mare, yoke her and plough the roads leading to the market. You can't imagine the amount of seeds that fall on the roads through the planks of the wagons as they bring the grain to the market!'

The son could hardly believe what his father had just told him. Would the idea work? Was that much grain getting lost? And the grain that was being lost, hadn't it been eaten by the birds on the roads? Was

his father losing his mind because he had been locked in the cellar for so many months?

When the first rains of spring came, the young man decided to carry out what his father had advised him to do. He took the black mare, attached the yoke to her and set about ploughing the roads leading to the market in the nearby village, as well as those leading to the more distant town. All this took place under the astonished gaze of neighbours and passers-by.

‘What are you doing?’ asked a group of neighbours when they saw him ploughing the roads. ‘Have you gone mad?’

‘No, I haven’t gone mad,’ replied the young man, caught up in blind trust in his father. ‘Do as I do and we’ll have food next winter.’

Only a few, thinking that it was the young man with that mare who had led them out of the terrible forest, ventured to follow his advice. So, they set about ploughing the roads, hoping that their young neighbour was right again. And soon after, lest this madness should work and they would have to beg for food from the others, other farmers gradually joined this strange idea of ploughing the roads all over the region.

A few weeks later, everyone began to see that the roads were greening up with all kinds of grains, even legumes, and hope began to brighten their hearts. As the weeks went by, they became more and more convinced that they would indeed have a strange harvest that year, but a harvest nonetheless, even if they had to sort through the grain afterwards to distinguish one cereal from another.

When harvest time came, and the people from all over the region gathered on the roads to collect the grain, sort it out and share it among themselves, there was no one who didn’t wonder who had come up with the idea, as that person had saved their lives and their children’s lives. And, little by little, they all ended up saying the name of the young man who had safely led them out of the forest after they had chased the monster away.

When, after the harvest, a huge crowd of neighbours from all over the region came to thank him for what he had done and asked him how he had come up with such a brilliant idea, the young man replied:

‘It’s not me who you have to thank for the food with which you will feed your children next winter, nor was I the one who thought that my black mare could bring all of us alive out of the dark forest,’ said the young man humbly. ‘The one you have to thank is my father, who I did not leave abandoned on the mountain when this absurd custom of ours demanded it, and who I have kept hidden in our cellar for more than a year for fear that you would discover him.’

A heavy silence fell over the crowd.

‘The elderly may no longer be able to contribute to the wellbeing of the community with work and physical effort,’ the young man continued, accepting whatever might happen, ‘but that doesn’t mean we have to call them useless and a burden to the younger ones. They still bring a lot of things to the table that we younger and stronger ones are unable to bring. They are more aware than we are, they see things much more clearly than we do, and they have a life of experience that we younger people lack.’

After a brief silence looking sadly at everyone in the eyes, he added:

‘Don’t you think we could do away forever with the custom of abandoning old people in the mountains and the idea that old people are not useful to the community?’

From that day on, no one else in the region ever again abandoned an old man or an old woman in the mountains. Furthermore, no one else in the communities ever again spoke of the futility of the elderly. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2022).

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Comments

This very ancient tale comes from the historical region of Banat, which today extends over the territories of three countries – Romania, Serbia and Hungary – although similar versions of this story are also found in the oral tradition of Transylvania (also in Romania) and Macedonia.

A version of this story was published in 1845 in German by the Schott brothers, who claimed that it was a story from Roman times. On the other hand, other authors – Hehn, Sainenun, Schmidt – between the 19th and 20th centuries, claimed that this story also appeared in modern Greek traditions (Gaster, 1919). Finally, the prominent storyteller, Margaret Read MacDonald (2005), states that there are also adaptations of this story in various parts of Asia and Africa.

It should come as no surprise that this story is so widespread, according to the claims of researchers such as Coe, Palmer, Aiken and Cassidy (2005). These scholars have investigated traditional narratives from an evolutionary perspective, considering them as ‘as ancestral strategies that encourage the behaviors that had fitness benefits’. From this perspective, they concluded that stories might also be subject to natural selection, so that those stories which favour the survival of collectives would be the most likely to be passed on from generation to generation. Evidently, this story would not only favour the survival of the group by revalorising the experience of the older generations, but would also reflect the researchers’ own conclusion.

But the wide spreading of the story could also be due to the geographical circumstances of the Banat region itself, which has been subject to many political and cultural upheavals since prehistoric times, as it is located in an area of migration between Europe and Asia. Indeed, nowadays, the historic Banat region is home to Romanian, Serbian, Hungarian, German, Slovak and Roma ethnic groups.

Sources

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 11c: Strengthen families and ensure the safety and loving nurture of all family members.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.

Principle 1a: Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.

Principle 3a: Ensure that communities at all levels guarantee human rights and fundamental freedoms and provide everyone an opportunity to realize his or her full potential.

Principle 12a: Eliminate discrimination in all its forms, such as that based on race, color, sex, sexual orientation, religion, language, and national, ethnic or social origin.

Principle 13b: Support local, regional and global civil society, and promote the meaningful participation of all interested individuals and organizations in decision making.

The Way Forward: Every individual, family, organization, and community has a vital role to play.