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Lived Philosophy: How We Define Ourselves and Our Lives

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1. The Birth and Evolution of a Novel Idea

The process of coming up with a specific area of focus for this self-directed research project was by no means an easy decision. Filled to the brim as I've been with reflection and examination of my past four years spent studying philosophy, I felt it was important to explore a previously unstudied area that inspired me as both a student of philosophy and a human being. For the purpose of achieving this, I could think of no better way to employ my philosophical training than by taking an active approach. Thus, my idea that brings together philosophy and praxis was born. In realizing that the noblest pursuit I could explore was to integrate my interests in people's thoughts and ideas in a practical application of philosophy, I settled on the idea of examining life through the lens of age.

Though broad in its humble beginnings, my focus in this project shifted from an exploration into the subjectivity of ethics and experiences to one geared specifically toward asking individuals to share the experience of living, aging, death and dying. Not long after I began this work, my focus shifted to elderly women coming to terms with and accepting the ultimate human fate of finitude. I felt a connection in getting to speak with such an outstanding group of older women, and it became apparent that they viewed me as a young woman full of promise and blessed with opportunities that in some cases, perhaps, they were denied. In addition, the relationship we created was one based in reciprocity. I was overwhelmingly grateful that they had agreed to be interviewed for my research, and they were appreciative that a young woman would care to listen about their lives.

In order to engage in the meaningful philosophical discourse I sought to attain, it became necessary for me to define a set of criteria. In considering the perspectives of elderly women, I began to seek out individuals that met four key criteria: *alert, aware, insightful, and communicative*. After establishing the criteria necessary for interviewing, the process of choosing individuals to include in my work became a substantially more manageable task to undertake with these qualifications in mind. I began to seek out extraordinary individuals ranging in age from 87-97. The four women I ultimately selected to include in my project had all reached the point of accepting their lives as nearing completion. Though I had no previous experience in the field of applied philosophy, I saw the opportunity in interviewing the elderly as a chance to explore both a practical application of philosophy, while at the same time expanding my understanding of the human condition.

In preparation for these interviews, I had a multitude of philosophically driven questions I intended to ask—based on my interests in Simone de Beauvoir’s account of her mother’s passing in *A Very Easy Death* and Foucault’s examination of the art of the self. Initially, I had conjured up a list of philosophical questions ranging from: “what does it mean to be *you*” to “what was the most challenging ethical dilemma you ever had to face?” However, I was shortsighted in assuming that these questions would be easy to implement into conversation. I learned that getting each woman to engage in a life narrative revealed far more of her individual experiences and beliefs than would be garnered by being so objectively academic.

2. Preparation: Environment, Trust, and Communication

I would be remiss if I didn't disclose how hesitant and anxious I was about conducting the interviews. A great deal of careful consideration was necessary in order to effectively engage in interviewing. Although I was eager to employ my philosophical training to take on an active approach to inquiry, there were a lot of unknowns to me in terms of dealing with the elderly. I had absolutely no experience with posing intimate questions about the nature of aging and the approach toward the end of life. As I mention further on, I had never even taken up such questions with family or friends. As a result, there was certainly a lot to learn that could only be met through direct experience and engaging with individuals. Predictably, the brunt of my discomfort occurred during the start of my research when I had so many growing concerns about collecting such intimate information.

Spending so much time in nursing homes was of primary discomfort to me. Beauvoir refers in *A Very Easy Death* to these sterile environments as "death-chambers." I wondered how the environment of a nursing home would impact my ability to conduct an interview, and if I would be able to cope with witnessing the insufferable tragedy of seeing others in pain and discomfort. The first hurdle to overcome was to walk into the door of the nursing homes and acclimate myself to the environment I would consider the "field." When I thought about entering Scallop Shell Nursing Home and the South Kingstown Rehabilitation Center, I was intimidated by the idea of walking past crumpled bodies consigned to wheelchairs and unable to move or feed by themselves--essentially vegetables still clinging to the vine of life. However, once I arrived with a specific room

to go to, all my attention was focused on the person I was slated to meet and less time on wondering how lonely or abandoned the other residents were. Thus, it was an easy fear to overcome.

Another aspect of the experience that deserved much thoughtful consideration was the nature of my communication with the individuals themselves. Meeting someone in their eighties or nineties for the first time was to be considerably different than speaking to a peer or family member of age. I constantly questioned whether or not the subject *really* wanted to talk to me and if it was okay for me to ask them about their lives. At times I felt intrusive, and as is evidenced in the first interview, hampered by the notion of discussing something as personal as death. Though I had been told that individuals who have accepted their deaths do not shy away from putting it all on the table rather bluntly, it was quite a difficult process for me to feel secure in my intentions. I lost a lot of time worrying about being perceived as polite, because as I would later come to learn, there is nothing rude about speaking honestly about the nature of dying.

I was advised to be direct as possible in my speaking and to phrase my questions in the most straightforward way I could in order to make sure that I was well understood. In addition, it would have been in poor taste to go along with the questions I had originally constructed that sometimes made use of jargon or specific theories that would require lengthy explanations or coaxing during explanations. As I sought after authenticity and genuine responses, any question that required explanation would take me further from my goal. I needed to be as personable as possible, and as you can see in my accounts of each interview, exhibiting an interest in something as simple as “where were you born?” made all the difference in starting conversation. Each of the individuals I

interviewed was described as being someone with much to say but *no one* to say it to. It was necessary for me not to waste their time by beating around the bush. Every moment is of utmost importance and I shouldn't be so rude as to waste someone's time when they accepted that any moment could be their last. Furthermore, this imbued the meetings I had with a resounding sense of honor and great dignity in communicating what was said to me in as authentic a manner as possible.

One component of interacting that had not been obvious to me was what was necessary in order to create a sense of intimacy, trust, and thereby convey a personal interest in the individuals with whom I was communicating. All too often these individuals are looked at as nothing more than the embodiment of the illnesses that plague their aging bodies. The person underneath, who has a multitude of experiences and memories, is stripped of their humanity and replaced with the sterility of modern medicine. As such, making eye contact and speaking in as loud a voice as I could manage seemed reasonably expected, but one rule of interaction proved far less intuitive to me, that of touch. The particular importance of touch is something that is absolutely necessary to communicate effectively and personally with elderly individuals—particularly women.

With their eyesight declining by the minute, ears that have trouble hearing, and bodies that can no longer function as responsively as they used to, touch establishes a necessary connection between individuals. As is detailed in the vignettes, I did not enter or leave a single visit without hugging, kissing, or touching each woman in some capacity. At first, this felt awkward for me, in that I could not get over my fear that I was going to harm or be invasive to individuals that are in such a physically frail state, but

once I initiated a touch of the shoulder or kiss on the cheek I was amazed at how much touch played a role in establishing trust and rapport with each woman. By fearing that I could be “breaking” a frail body with the slightest touch of a hand, I was only playing into the ageist myths that Beauvoir accounts in *The Coming of Age*. With their eyesight declining by the minute, ears that have trouble hearing, and bodies that they can no longer exercise power over, the power of touch—the intimacy of making contact with another body—has a greatly elevated importance in the course of communication.

2. Philosophical Framework

Simone de Beauvoir

When it came time to focus on which works would be most pertinent to pursuing a study of aging and dying persons, I followed recommendations to explore the extensive work of Simone de Beauvoir in relation to the phenomenology of aging. Throughout my four years in the philosophy department, I have been exposed to the work of Beauvoir as an existentialist thinker and a brilliant intellectual: what she says of literature, her groundbreaking work in *The Second Sex*, and of course her relationship with Jean Paul Sartre. However, prior to displaying interest in the subject of death, dying, and age, I hadn't even heard of *The Coming of Age*, or *A Very Easy Death*. Both of these works serve as a testament to Beauvoir's dedication to demystifying what is at the very core of the phenomenology of aging in society. In the tirelessly comprehensive work for which she is so well known, Beauvoir elucidates the inescapable nature of aging in order to

rectify what she identifies as being misunderstood, misinterpreted, and mythically portrayed in society.

Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* showcases the caliber of exhaustive inquiry for which she has become so well known—an account of aging and the problems that face the elderly from civilization to civilization. In the comprehensive account given in this massive work, her stress on recognizing that one's humanity does not fade in old age is of particular relevance to my project of attempting to elucidate how the lens of age affects an individual's view of life and death. In that I am attempting to portray the perspective related to me by my elderly subjects, so too does Beauvoir focus on giving a voice to the silenced. She makes it her task to recognize the humanity in the voices of the aged, as “if their voices were heard, the hearers would be forced to acknowledge that these were human voices” (COA 3). By systematically analyzing the false associations, stereotypes, and myths that dominate society's view of the elderly, Beauvoir is presenting work that has never been undertaken on so grand a scale. Though we tend to view aging as being alien to us in our youth, Beauvoir argues that “if we do not know what we are going to be, we cannot know what we are: let us recognize ourselves in this old man or in that old woman” (COA 5). This work, almost a manual, in a sense, to the problems of ageism and misperceptions of the experience of aging would serve to provide me with the foundation upon which to launch my study with the elderly individual.

Beauvoir's 1964 work entitled *A Very Easy Death* provides a substantial personal account of aging that has served as my primary inspiration in preparing for and executing this project—both in form and philosophical concentration. This narrative chronicles the last six weeks of her mother's life—from the fall that leaves her with a broken femur to

the discovery of an advanced cancer that quickly takes her life. Beauvoir observes in an intrinsically philosophical style the rapid decline of her mother, in her ability to “contrast the truth of her suffering body and the nonsense that her head was stuffed with” (VED 24). In providing both emotional and objective perspectives, she expresses what it is like to witness the death of a loved one from the position of both daughter and philosopher. Beauvoir’s insight and torment in observing the transformation from her mother to corpse is rife with philosophical jewels about the nature of finitude that resides within us all. In her eventual passing, Beauvoir writes, “foreseeing is not knowing: the shock was as violent as though we had not expected it at all” (VED 111).

Though a philosopher by training, this piece shows that she is not immune to experiencing the guilt, questioning, and feelings of inadequacy that accompany grieving and loss. Between having to falsely reassure her ailing mother that she shall indeed recover, as “she clung to this life buoy,” (VED 71) to the eventual characterization of the six weeks leading to her death ultimately being “rotted by betrayal” (VED 112) in her mother’s passing, Beauvoir successfully elucidates what it is like for herself and her sister to be vigilant observers from their mother’s bedside while still dealing with the ramifications that ultimately death is a solitary endeavor. The piece exists as both an objective account of her mother’s illness and death, as well as an emotional testament of the philosophical implications of watching a loved one suffering. The way in which Beauvoir’s emotions and humanity shine through her struggle to reckon with the death of her mother was inspirational to me on a level previously unmet in theoretical interpretations.

Rorty and Derrida

Throughout the interview process I was very diligent in my note taking. I would carefully record the facts, quotes, and fragments that resulted from my interviews. As a result, by the end of the semester I had a small purple notebook chock full of scrawling messages detailing the lives of these women. As I look back on my notes carefully recording the names, ages, family information, and upbringings of each woman, I am reminded of how much of a journey the process of evolving this idea has taken.

As my intention in devising this project arose from a desire to depart from traditional research in favor of exploring a philosophical praxis, accordingly, it is my goal to approach the presentation of my work in a similarly progressive mode. Rooted in a departure from the structure, formula, and rigidity that have so far defined my work as a student, this paper shall serve as an experiment with a new style of writing. I drew much inspiration from Richard Rorty's essay entitled, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing," as I believe a freer and more original perspective will produce a work of philosophical nature all the same.

Rorty's essay elucidates Jacques Derrida's belief that philosophy is "best seen as a kind of writing" (NLH 143). Ideologically opposed to the notion in the Kantian tradition that philosophy in written form represents a last resort, or "an unfortunate necessity," (NLH 145) Rorty isolates this form of writing as one that aims to show or exhibit something outside of itself. Derrida names two kinds of writing: "the good and natural is the divine inscription in the heart and the soul," and "the perverse and artful is technique, exiled in the exteriority of the body" (NLH 146). In calling for its destruction, Derrida purports that the book exists as an abomination: an "idea of totality, finite or

infinite, of the signifier,” describing it as “profoundly alien to the sense of writing” that must ultimately be overcome (NLH 146). As most scholarly philosophical writing is deliberately crafted to adhere to a specific school of thought or tradition, it can be observed that, “nobody does any really “written” writing without timidly hoping that what he writes may have philosophical implication” (NLH 157).

Derrida’s writing actively rebels against this fixedness that is so pervasively engrained in the Kantian tradition, as is evidenced in his, “refusal to take the standard rules seriously” (NLH 149). Rorty writes that this attitude in which Derrida “plays” with certain philosophers in not taking himself seriously, creating writing that is free of inhibitions and opposed to a writing for the aim of producing a finalized totality of completion. Unmotivated by the level of totality and specificity that defines the works of so many philosophers, Rorty describes Derrida as being completely uninterested with the task of writing a philosophy. As he is neither giving the complete account of anything, nor actively seeking to refute the errors of a particular school of philosophical thought (NLH 147), Derrida envisions language existing as “*not* a tool, but that in which we live.” and therefore it can be said that ‘there is nothing outside of the text’ (NLH 148).

Foucault

In a 1984 interview, Michel Foucault elucidates the phenomenon of hypomnemata. Described as a particular style of writing that was gaining rapid popularity in the Platonic era, historically of particular interest to Foucault, hypomnemata is described as being a notebook or copybook. The experiences, sounds, or fragments one witnesses comprise hypomnemata. Foucault describes, “they constituted a material memory of things read, heard, or thought, thus offering these as an accumulated treasure

for rereading and later meditation.” Hypomnemata embodies a mastery of self in that it serves to constitute a personal relationship to oneself through this reflection and meditation that is achieved through sources outside of the self.

Foucault is careful to warn that this collection of sources represents a mastery of oneself, but not an actual account of oneself. In being neither personal diary nor tool for spiritual exploration, hypomnemata is, “nothing less than the constitution of oneself.” This ‘notebook’ relates to the ethics of the care of oneself in as much as it allows for “a retiring into oneself, reaching oneself, living with oneself.” Such a level of critical reflection is absolutely necessary if one is to attain mastery of the self—much like a governor rules the governed. In this sense, the constitution of oneself that results from such critical reflection can be evidenced in this collection of sources.

This project exists as hypomnemata in that it is entirely based on the words, ideas, and descriptions of my interviews with four different women. Through the review and writing of these vignettes detailing my experiences, it is fair to say that the process of writing has become the process of forming myself. Coupled with the notion of letting go of a deliberately crafted form of writing that strives to attain validity in relation to a specific philosophical tradition, this amalgamation of descriptive fragments proves to give insight into my own condition as an evolving human conscience, and a way by which to constitute myself.

4. Vignettes

Doris – Age 87

Doris was the first person who volunteered to speak to me about her lived experiences. Though I had such a clear idea of what I wanted to ask her, I would come to learn that life doesn't always allow you a second chance. Before meeting her, it occurred to me that I had never asked these questions to friends or family members. Considering that I was to ask someone who is terminally ill and fading quickly, I would be remiss if I said I had no reservations or unease about how to approach the topics. On a blustery March day I anxiously awaited my Friday morning meeting with this 87 year-old woman. As I walked down the hallway of Scallop Shell and turned the corner that led to her room, I saw the body of an old woman bereft of any trace of its former vitality. Feebly perched over an uneaten tray of food, Doris' eyes met mine as I walked toward her, unsure of what would result from our conversation.

In her frailty she had granted me the only gift we have: time. Though her parlous state was apparent, she had what I can only describe as a mysterious glow about her that seemed to shout out "I'm dying!" Right before me sat the living proof that it is possible to stare one's finitude dead in the eyes—to accept graciously the gift of peace that comes with the death. Doris did not look sad or distressed by any means, though I knew that there was a war waging inside her body. She was a ticking time bomb waiting to go off, yet from the outside her calmness was courageously inspiring to me. Why did this surprise me so? Philosophy tells us that indeed only death is the certainty in life, yet why is it that I, as a young person, am so ignorant of the shadow it casts over my *own* life?

I introduced myself in an attempt to express my gratitude for her agreeing to meet with me, as well as confirming for the fourth time that she was okay with speaking with me. It was immediately apparent she was having trouble breathing, and I told her that I could come back later to talk to her and that she should rest. To this, she replied, “I can do it.” She reached her frail hand over mine and told me that in a moment she would be getting a breathing treatment that would help her feel more comfortable and then we could speak. Not soon after those words, she asked me to help her put the mask on so that she could get some relief. Never before had I felt more at risk of harming someone than when I was first presented with this task—it was as though I thought she were as fragile as a paper doll. What if I had pressed too hard? What if she passed away in my presence and I had to get help? Could I possibly stand the pressure or burden on my conscience if something happened while we were alone? How would I deal with anything going wrong? This was the learning curve, I reminded myself...

After she inhaled a few big breaths from her mask, she told me she was ready to talk. I began to speak but she couldn't hear me-- I couldn't decide if I should be embarrassed or sorry when I realized I had to essentially yell for her to hear me. How inconsiderate of me not to realize I needed to speak louder! My list of questions evaporated into thin air as I sat next to someone clearly coming to the end of an unpleasant illness that had claimed far too much of her time. Without asking, I knew that Doris had accepted her death and was readily waiting for its arrival—I just couldn't imagine hearing her say it. There she was with a face that seemed to read, “it's been such a long time, I'm ready,” but I couldn't broach the subject. In refusing to ask her about death, I was thereby refusing to admit to *myself* that she was going to die.

I turned the attention to the pictures that adorned the walls of her room—colorful shots from various seasons displaying beautiful little children that clearly resembled their grandmother. She began giving the name and birthday for each child and it became clear to me that her family was her first priority in life as well as her biggest concern in death. She explained without any hesitation that the first and foremost way in which she identified was as a wife and a mother. I inquired whether her family visited her often. She showed her sense of humor, remarking, “they never leave me alone! They’re here every day.” I was tickled by this response, as it is true that ultimately death is a solitary journey, but I have no doubt she relished every minute she saw her twin grand daughters for visits in her room.

I asked her how many children she had and she answered that she had had 4, but that one had died. Not wishing to press the matter, I remained silent. She then shared with me that her son Bruce had died at the age of 26. While walking across the street he had been struck by a car and killed instantly. I waited for a visible reaction on her face, though the tears I expected to appear never came to her eyes, but mine instead. She had a look of so much love and compassion that seemed to permeate her entire being—one that said she had no more time left to be sad. She had spent too many sleepless nights paralyzed by the loss of her son and in her old age had come to find comfort in the idea that death would reunite her with the spirit of her son and husband. Profoundly struck by her sense of resolve and peace in speaking of her loss, I knew she was speaking the truth when she said she would see them again. Never before had I heard someone speak about death as being a long awaited comfort—an event filled with love and resolve. Noticeably fatigued and exhausted from her trouble breathing, I helped her remove the mask and

covered her legs with her afghan. I decided that she had spent long enough speaking with me in such a strained physical condition and asked her if it was okay for me to come visit again to finish our interview another day.

Not long after I left Doris that day, I received word that she had finally succumbed to the illness that had been overtaking her. It was a peaceful death, I was told, surrounded the family she had loved so very much. I found myself incomprehensibly moved by this news, though to say I was surprised would be the wrong word. As I thought about what had impacted me in such a fundamental way as I sat by her frail body, it was the fact that she was allowing *me*—a complete stranger—to spend time with her that she would never get back. She had accepted the unavoidable finality of her own existence as a destiny that she had spent her whole life waiting for. I would soon come to realize that the level of intimacy reached in these interviews was an unparalleled closeness that reverberated deep within my heart and soul.

When I attended Doris' wake I was introduced to her living children and various other family members. After viewing the open casket that contained a woman far beyond my recognition, I felt a sense of ease knowing that she was no longer suffering in any pain. I was reminded of Beauvoir's observations of her mother's metamorphosis from living being into corpse, yet it did not scare me—that was no longer her. No more would she have to struggle for the breath that continually escaped her. She was right where she wanted to be: resting in peace with her dear son and beloved husband. Speaking with her children, I learned that Doris had told them all about my visit and my interest in her life. One of her daughters offered to mail me more information about her life and the eulogies for her service in the case that they could help me with my project in some way. When I

received an envelope containing those very items, I realized the unyielding extent of how much of an honor it had been to meet with her. I just wished I hadn't been so scared of admitting the truth: she was dying right before my eyes.

In that this was the first subject I interviewed—as well as the first independent research project I'd ever conducted—the experience that came with meeting and losing Doris is one that shall stay with me forever. Knowing that I had frittered away the opportunity to explore her experience made me realize more than ever that there are no second chances. There exists nothing more precious than the time we have, and to think of her bowing out with dignity and love warmed my heart. Though it was sad to me that my first interview should result in such finality, I was able to realize the true depth and breadth of this project I had chosen to undertake. Right from the start I had been presented with the most grave of all circumstances-- I could either choose to run away in fear or to face the reality that I could completely alter my outlook on the world and my relations with other people.

Rita – Age 95

As I walked into her dark room—curtains closed at 9 in the morning—I was surprised to when I was promptly and exuberantly welcomed in by Rita. She was perched on her bed and with a smile across her face and announced, “I’m Rita...you’re Molly. I’ve heard all about you. You’re about to turn 22 and I’m about to turn 95 in May!” As I too am born in May, I asked her which day in particular, only to discover that the synchronicity of the universe had once again worked its mysterious ways. Rita and I share the same birthday—or perhaps it is more accurate that I share *her* birthday, as she

was already well into her seventies by the time I entered into existence. Such a coincidence tore down the barrier of young and old and put me at ease.

It had been only a few minutes into our meeting and I had already been surprised by her vivaciousness in greeting me, which in comparison to the other individuals already set her apart. She took my hand and pulled me in for a kiss, explaining that she was so looking forward to meeting with me, though she did not think that there was anything special about her life in particular. First, she explained, she must get into her wheelchair—but when I asked her if she wanted some help she adamantly refused.

It was a matter of pride and a way of identifying for Rita to show that even in her 95 years of inhabiting her body, she wasn't willing to give up the last ounces of strength she had left. Once she finagled her way into her chair, Rita sat civilly and deliberately across from me. She initiated eye contact with her tired, cloudy eyes. This was undoubtedly a showing of her hospitality, as after all I was the one visiting her "home." Rita apologized for her tendency to have a poor short term memory, yet in the two hours I spent with her there was only a single word that escaped her: condominium.

It was apparent to me that she felt betrayed by her body in its old age, yet at the same time it was obvious that she operated on both a cognitive and social level far beyond the other inhabitants of the nursing home. Rita had suffered a cerebral aneurism at the age of 80 that should have killed her. She made a miraculous and unexpected recovery, though at the expense of a grueling treatment and rehabilitation process. Arriving here originally with her second husband, it was not long after that she found herself widowed for the second time in her life. As I stood up to draw the curtains open revealing the joyous sunlight accompanying us on that March day, I noticed that the bay

window that stretched almost from her bed to her closet, functioned as her only contact with the outside world. This is the first glimpse of a tragic loneliness that Rita's existence—alone and yet so very aware. When I drew attention to the vacant bed sitting on the other side of the room, Rita explained that the other woman in her room is not someone that can provide her any company. I wondered if there was *anyone* that could provide her company here.

She explained how difficult it has been to live here for the past 8 years, and I asked her if she has had any trouble dealing in living with other residents whose conditions are in much sharper of a decline than hers. Rita painted a picture of how terrifying it is to wake up everyday in an environment where she feels “scared” of the other residents who are effectively “vegetables.” Groaning and non-communicative, they are miles away from her level of functioning, thus she spends her days in her room by herself. This solidarity and separation from others broke my heart and I wished that I could do something to help her.

The sense of shame and embarrassment that Rita exhibited about the process of aging was easily detectable. She does not like the idea of her body deteriorating--as her mind is *far* from such a point—and fears her inevitable decline into pain and suffering. I asked her to share the point in her life when she specifically started to feel “old.” Remarkably, that moment didn't arrive until she was well into her eighties. On a fall day years ago, Rita had fallen outside using her walker and swore she'd never walk again due to sheer embarrassment it has caused her. Even though perhaps she could have been mobile longer, spurred by the sting of shame that comes with age, she had rendered herself immobile and nowadays she can't even feel her legs.

Rita is going blind, a fact that bothers her a great deal as she has always been an avid reader. From a young age, she said that she would hide reading books of all kinds in order to escape scolding from her Mother, who would rather that she spend time preparing to be a good wife and mother. Rita would have that introduction to marriage and motherhood not long before the end of World War II. She had a boyfriend who had gone away to fight, but as the years passed and she received no word, she decided to move on. By the time her boyfriend returned home, Rita was married with two children. Yet she still met her ex as he got off the train to welcome him back to a brand new life—without her. This sense of agency and independence is just one of the many examples shared of her exercising the power to make decisions about her life.

The first woman who had a professional career I spoke with, Rita worked for decades as a third-shift nurse while still being present every morning and evening to raise her five children. She was brought to the profession due to the failure of her husband's grocery store, and soon become the breadwinner. When I asked her to explain the best decision she ever made, she recounted administering an IV in the middle of the night to a patient. In those days, only doctors had the ability to do things like that, so she took a chance and successfully inserted the needle in the middle of the night so she didn't have to wake up the slumbering resident. This thankless accomplishment was her secret, a small victory that represented authority and independence to her. Being a nurse and raising her family seemed impossible to me, and I asked how she was able to get through it all, to which she answered: "you never know what you can do until you have to."

Living to such an age, one can imagine that the extent of loss you experience is painful to say the least. As she is approaching a century of existence, I asked if losing her

friends and loved ones has been the biggest disappointment of living for so long. Two of her children have already died due to cancer, as well as her first and second husband. She rattles off all the names of her lost siblings, friends, and colleagues. Left by those she cared for in their death, in her lonely and isolated state, she expressed feeling deserted even by her living family members as well. Her youngest daughter visits about every two weeks to play Scrabble and eat a meal with her, but Rita placed emphasis on how the meetings have the tendency to be infrequent.

The solitude, isolation, and removal from the family she worked so hard to protect and provide for is the most unpleasant and upsetting part about her life. I held back tears as I heard her exclaim things like, “I am so depressed because I don’t see my family,” “I think they have forgotten about me, and “I’m disgusted because I feel so alone.” As a result, this interview represented to me the most tragic and arguably the most unsettling account of what it is like when you age to a point in which you are completely abandoned. Though I know I cannot get too emotionally involved, the element of humanity that Rita’s sense of abandonment is crying out in desperation for company. I felt helpless as I left her, embracing her with a big hug and thanking her for her time. I cannot help but wonder how long it has been since a new acquaintance paid any attention to her. The loneliness Rita expressed was indeed my biggest fear in conducting interviews in the first place, but all the same, she was the epitome of the person that had much to say but no one to say it *to*. I am just thankful that on that particular day, I was there to listen.

Cecile – Age 90

Walking into Cecile's room, I was surprised to meet her daughter, Lorraine. This was to be the only interview I conducted in the presence of another person. Though at first I questioned her presence when Lorraine began to help her mother answer a question or two on her mother's behalf, I ultimately believed that her daughter's presence put Cecile more at ease in speaking with me. I would later learn of her recent near-death experience. Cecile was a sweet old woman with a positive disposition and a great sense of humor. As she sat up in her hospital bed, I couldn't help but notice her tiny body looked strained by the mountainous weight of the blankets on top of her skeletal frame. Cecile explained to me that she had been recently admitted to the nursing home at the age of 90 after taking a fall that broke her hip. Just two days prior to my visit, she explained, she had a near death experience. Curious about what had happened, Lorraine told me that her mother's heartbeat dropped to a dramatic 25 beats per minute. With the understanding that she was at the end, she telephoned her son in Arizona and proclaiming, "I'm dying!" in a very matter of fact sense. A strange satisfaction arose from her in the acceptance of her fate, and both women laughed at recalling the event of the phone call. I can only imagine the shock on the other end of the line...but what is even more shocking is the reason that Cecile credits for pulling through this episode: her love of reading.

As she recently arrived in Wakefield, Cecile shared with me that as an avid reader, it was her life's belief that "if you're going to live in a place you should learn about it," a motto that carried her through all of her life so far, so why not now? She had been reading the Wakefield town history—as well as a book about the Narragansett Indians—and told me that she "hadn't finished reading them yet," and that she resolved

to finish the books. She marks finishing her books as her sole motivation in her feeble body's ability to see another day. As Cecile relayed this to me, I almost thought this was another manifestation of her sense of humor, but she was dead serious. She honestly cited the reason for her pull back from death had been directly tied to her desire to read!

At this point, as a student of philosophy, I couldn't help but reach out to Camus and his notion of the absurd. If coming back from the edge of certain death, only to be solely motivated by a desire to finish two books about the town of Wakefield and the Narragansetts isn't absurd, then I don't know what it means. The point remains that Cecile could have conjured up any motivation to place her will to live in and it would be equally absurd. All the same, her bemused portrayal of the events was light hearted and absurd at the same time. As this opened up a dialogue about the broader concept of what it means to die, I next asked her how she felt about the prospect of facing her death in the eyes again. Cecile quickly replied, "I'm not scared," and "I'm more afraid of being in pain than of dying."

Next, she shared with me a quote her grandfather used to say that she remembered from her youth: "you're born to die." She repeated this, taking in its full profundity and expressing her gratitude to her grandfather for "telling me the truth." Her daughter seconded this, mentioning she had grown up hearing this as well. The honesty represented in the dialog about death between mother and daughter was truly a moving sight to behold. Cecile told me that she even went as far as having already planned her funeral arrangements, as she wants her wishes to be honored and not burdening her grieving family. She cited the first thing of utmost importance in her service as being, "no showing, I do not want to have an open casket."

I tried to get each woman to identify the way she defined herself, Cecile's answer was that she identified herself as a mother, reader, cook, friend and an excellent golfer. In her older years she had moved to Florida and made several girlfriends in her golf club, essentially redefining herself in a new stage of life. She spoke to the importance of maintaining friendships throughout the various stages of life. As for the cooking component of her identity, Cecile married a farmer and took pride in preparing the best meals out of the freshest fruits and vegetables nature had to offer her growing family. She shared with me her late husband's propensity to be a practical joker and it was moving to see both Cecile and Lorraine speak in such a nostalgic light.

The subject of aging was easy to discuss with Cecile, as she was always very in touch with her physical self and lived an active lifestyle as a farmer's wife and mother, and later as an avid golfer. I asked specifically when she started to feel "old," and she explained it had been 3 years ago when she had to stop driving. Driving represented the activity that comes with being an able bodied member of society, and that Cecile was 87 before she abdicated her license was quite a shock to me.

When I asked her about the toughest decision she ever struggled with during her lifetime, she didn't have to think hard to answer, "I think everything was, at least every decision involving my family." In closing, the element of having her daughter present in the room added a whole new dynamic to the interview. Being able to observe the way that the two interacted and that it was okay for them to talk about things like death was reassuring to me after my initial hardship in finding the courage to ask about dying. I appreciated Cecile's sense of humor and her keen sense of memory—but most of all, her

love of reading and how it saved her from certain death is something I think I could ever forget.

Hildegard (Hilda) – Age 97

The experience of meeting with Hilda on two separate occasions was another experience I shall never forget. The only woman who didn't live in a nursing home—and coincidentally the oldest—I walked to the door of her Kingston apart and knocked on the door. A pleasant change from interviewing people in dimly lit nursing home rooms, I thought. She had been expecting my arrival and came to the door in a light green color cashmere sweater and some khaki slacks—not to mention her walker. By the looks of her, it was clear that Hilda is a rather frail elderly woman, but she didn't waste time pitying her aging body. I won't deny that you can hear her age in her faint German accent either—but what is so fascinating in speaking with her is her incredible journey that ended in the state of Rhode Island. Hilda, in a part of her life that seems so distantly far off, survived the Bombing of Leipzig. When her husband was imprisoned for refusing to spy for the communists, Hilda made what she calls the easiest *and* hardest decision of her life: fleeing her native Germany with two young boys in tow. Unable to grab a change of clothes, bed linens, or anything that would tip off a neighbor, friend, or even a family member that she was leaving, she purchased a US Visa through a Christian organization, took off, and arrived in New York as a wanted woman. A lifelong Christian, Hilda explained that the church paid for her Visa (which she paid back with additional interest) and so she felt indebted to the religion and has been a lifelong member. In fact, when

asked how she identifies herself most closely as, Hilda told me “a good person...and a Christian.”

If I’ve ever met anyone who best embodied what I perceive to be a Christian life, 97 year-old Hilda is that person. Her biggest concern in youth, middle age, and even old age has been first and foremost to help others. She had a lengthy discussion with me in which she detailed how she is sad that in her old age and increasing poverty, she “can’t do enough to help anymore,” before painting the picture of herself as the type of person that agonizes over what charity to give \$5 to. Her son tells her that such little money doesn’t make a difference, but according to Hilda, “I think it can help.” She is still active in her local church events, and many of her friends are still members. She has become increasingly more delicate, yet lives alone in a tiny apartment that is well furnish and nicely kept. She even offered me chocolates when I sat down on the couch to start speaking with her! She didn’t credit her religion in being her reason for explaining much of her positive and optimistic outlook on a world that had deceived her years earlier, but I’d go as far as to reckon it had at least some bearing.

Just as the other women were so open about their families, Hilda explained to me how the most important things in her life are her family and helping people. In her aging condition, however, she sees her ability to help declining, to which she said, “I like to help people. I feel sorry I cannot anymore.” One of her sons visits her everyday. He helps her complete basic tasks that are slowly becoming too much for her to handle: grocery shopping, driving her to do errands, and the like. Her love for her son was evident as soon as she first mentioned his name. A look of admiration and thankfulness occupied her face as she told me how much he spends time with her. In fact, at one point in the interview,

Hilda detailed the incident about ten years ago in which she got hit by a truck—the point in her life that made her have a little more difficulty moving around and left her in chronic pain. She suddenly asked me if she could make a phone call, called her son and asked him what kind of “truck” had hurt her. As the phone volume was up so loud, I heard “Jeep Cherokee” before she could repeat the news back to me.

Hilda’s expressed desire to help and prevent suffering for all individuals was a topic that was frequently mentioned. When I asked her if she felt as though it was hard to trust people after having fled German a wanted woman, Hilda explained, “no, I cannot say that. People are very nice, not hard to trust,” in her broken accent. To consider the ethical implications that escaping a war zone and taking refuge across the Atlantic made me sure that I can declare: I have never met someone with a more positive disposition about even the most mundane things. Another question I asked her was if she ever felt judged—either for being old or for being German—which of course, she replied “definitely not.” The idea that someone so gratefully optimistic—who has come from a past filled with deception and trickery (which was the way she described war-time Germany)—should metaphorically rise as phoenix above the ashes is one of the most inspiring cases of optimism and contentedness I had ever experienced meeting.

Hilda was the only woman who answered every single question I asked about her personal philosophy. She required no prodding or additional help from me—she just went with her gut. I asked if it was hard to lose people when you live to be so old, so she told me a few years ago she got a call from an old friend still in Germany. She was trying to tell me the magnitude of what it was like to reconnect over half a century of separation, telling me that her poor friend is “lonely” and grew up an orphan. “She is blind and

lonely,” Hilda explained, “I’m know I am luckier than her, she has no one.” Never ungrateful for the hand she has been dealt, Hilda’s expression of feeling so blessed with her family and her life is further proof of how much she values her life. She would do anything to help her friend if she could, but in reality, at such an old age, there is not much she can now do to help her friend.

On the concept of aging, Hilda expressed to me that around the age of 40, she started to notice she looked a little different. Nowadays, aging means she lacks an able body to do things to help herself. A lifelong seamstress---she is now too arthritic to make her own clothes. She cannot be as helpful to others as she would like, can’t do the dishes, and ever since that Jeep Cherokee hit her, she has to use a thin walker or cane. Still, she lives with no regrets. Though she said she doesn’t regret anything, she hinted at the possibility that she regretted leaving her family in Germany. She told me how she had left her brother there—not telling him she was leaving. However, she said, if there was anyone that could take care of themselves, it was her brother. Though she doesn’t necessarily regret this, it is evident that for Hilda, this is a point she struggles with. Thus, she doesn’t feel any “survivor’s guilt,” because she had no choice but to leave—it’s not as though it was an easy thing to do, but she had to do it.

In terms of her relationship to and apprehensiveness of her finitude, Hilda told me, “sometimes I don’t know why I live so long,” going on to say “God, take me in my sleep.” Just as much as she is hanging on to this worldly realm, she is eased by the idea that she will soon be released from her body. She told me that the biggest fear she has about herself—or anyone else—is that one should suffer. This drew me to ask if she believes people should be able to pull the plug on life-support machines. I presented her

with the ethical dilemma in the Terri Schiavo case (without explaining the specifics) and she told me that a person should be able to go out with dignity when possible. She agreed that living on a machine and being lost in a coma was no way to persist. After that, we got into a discussion about Foucault's notion of care in the self, in which the ability to care for oneself and demonstrate self-mastery and temperance. I explained to her the idea that duty to oneself supercedes all other obligations one is able to engage in, without being prompted she told me, "I could never be a good mother if I wasn't a good person." This was telling to me in that Hilda was the only person interviewed who was able to engage with what this meant. She told me about how valuable her own self was in order to help others, adding that something as small as having time to read or get her hair done was invaluable to her—even at the age of 97.

Meeting Hilda signified to me most the amazing power of the human spirit. With her unyieldingly optimistic nature she told me that if should would give me any advice on a young person, it would be to "help others more than you help yourself." As I sat there and spoke with her on that Monday afternoon, I was actively processing everything that blew me away about her: 97, lives alone, loves chocolate...even the littlest things left me in awe. For example, even at the age of 97 she has her hair done every two weeks. I never could have imagined that this project would lead me to someone so passionately engaged in living life and helping others spread good. It only seems fitting that she was the last person I interviewed for this project: the oldest, the one who has overcome the most adversity, maintains the best demeanor and, and the only one that wasn't in a nursing home. She is holding onto her dignity and respect for as long as she can, and in my opinion, it appears that she may just never let go of it. Hilda stands as the breathing

embodiment of everything I had hoped this project to result in—a strongly independent woman with an abundant history of life experiences to share. No sadness or hesitations held her back from communicating with me, and as a result, I did not feel sad in speaking with her. She shared with me on topics I had never before had the chance to engage in—yet any apprehensions I had about asking difficult questions were erased by her gentle kindness.

Closing Reflections

It is fair to say that on this journey of speaking with such amazingly vibrant examples of the boundless humanity that resides within us all, I experienced a transformation I couldn't possibly have anticipated. By expanding my understanding of what it means to live to such an old age, I was able to explore a range of philosophical issues that I hadn't considered in the ignorance of my youth. Though I have had to deal with the loss of grandparents, I have never been able to even imagine asking such questions of them. From my initial meeting with Doris that gave me such insight into the magnitude of the project at hand, I was forced to become aware that not all deaths are in fact sad. I managed to get past so many inhibitions I had in dealing with the elderly and finally understood that in death, there is no room for secrets. In Doris' death was resolve, peace, and the long awaited arrival of a tranquility that served as the ultimate end to worldly pain and suffering. I just only wish I could have had the courage to ask her more.

In seeing Rita—such an extraordinarily high functioning individual—I was forced to ask myself if I could imagine dealing with such feelings of loneliness and abandonment. Is it worth it to live well into your nineties if all you have to show for it is an extreme loneliness? What is it inside her that keeps her going—that gives her the

motivation to see birthday after birthday? I may be no closer to answering these questions, but in an increasing sense of ambiguity, I am able to reckon with the idea that not all questions pertaining to the human condition have such objective answers. There is no reason for me to ask whether I would like to be in her position in age because I have no way of knowing whether I'll live to see next year, let alone 95.

With Cecile's unyielding humor and acceptance of death as being as normal a task as reading a book, I managed to understand how such a witty individual finds death to be no different than life. Cecile's detachment from emotion to dying was startling at first, and it was almost as if I was trying to label it as a coping mechanism. Instead, Cecile would show me that it was simply her outlook on all aspects of life—not just a way to deal with death. Her account of what let her cling to her fragile life—reading two books—was easily the most absurdly ironic thing I heard in all my interviews. How poignantly this reason for living had struck me, in all of its irony—yet, who is to say that such a reason isn't enough to stay alive? If Cecile elucidated anything to me about the human condition, it was that each part of life is just as important as any other—no more and no less. It was in no way demeaning to her family that she didn't say her *children* were what kept her going, but rather, they thought it was just as much in line with their mother's character than anything else she did.

Lastly, the triumph of Hilda from suffering to thriving in the world that had faced her with such adversity is a living inspiration. To not feel victimized by circumstances beyond her control, instead allowing her experiences to justify the essential nature of helping all beings is breathtaking. Hilda shared with me that the most important thing I can do as a young person in this world is to help others before I help myself. Though I

have heard this said throughout my life, never before had I heard someone that came from such humble beginnings genuinely mean it as much as Hilda. Seeing her at such a frail age explain how sad it makes her that she cannot donate more than \$5 to help, or her lack of ability to volunteer like able-bodied persons, exists as an insight into humanity that I had been missing thus far in my life. Though I try to help others and pride myself on my empathy (in fact, my empathy is what drove me to conduct this project in the first place), being able to see someone have no excuses, complaints, or hard feelings about having lived through the sheer horror and violence that Hilda did allowed me to see there is a way to exist freely and with hope that shuts out all negatives. I am sure that the rest of Hilda's life was not easy, but her refusal to complain or justify shortcomings with excuses is a living testament to just how wondrous she sees the world. Her hope, love, and unyielding desire to help others is an example of compassion that I shall never forget as long as I am alive—whether I live for another year, or another seventy.

Though it was a stark departure from all previous work with philosophy that I have done, undertaking this project was challenging on a completely new level. I felt insecure about producing a paper to document these interviews, as nothing can amount to the reality of meeting with a stranger that has so much to say but no one else to say it to. I felt such a strong responsibility in honoring their stories and their lives, but at the end of it all, the best I can do to show my appreciation to Doris, Rita, Cecile, and Rita is to go on living my life with a newfound sense of purpose and appreciation for the littlest things. As I graduate and go on to interact more with the world and its peoples, these women will never cease to inspire me in my pursuits. Having the chance to share my desire to

understand with people so willing to explain is if nothing else, the crowning achievement to an amazing four years of studying philosophy.

In closing, it is important for me to give thanks to all who made this project as successful as I truly believe it has been. The support and guidance of many individuals made my foray into applied philosophy possible. All of the individuals who were so kind in speaking with me, particularly the four women included in the final project, deserve a world of thanks for their caring consideration and willingness to tell me about their lives. My faculty sponsor, Dr. Galen Johnson, provided support and guidance in reaffirming integrating my love of philosophy with a new living experience was possible, and if nothing less, a fruitful endeavor to pursue. Lastly, the guidance and careful referral of Dr. JJ Bandola, my father, was essential to finding these individuals to speak with. Though it was important to me that he was not affiliated with the interviews, I would never have found such extraordinary individuals without his help and guidance. I extend my deepest gratitude and many thanks to all individuals involved in helping me along with each step of this process.

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Also: Course Materials provided by Dr. Weiss