

Scared to death of dying

SOFTENING THE TRUTH: Patronizing euphemisms such as 'senior citizens' and 'golden years' don't loosen stiffening joints, counteract fatigue or increase diminishing appetites.

Recently, I've been spending time with my mother. She's 74, lives in an extended care facility, and is struggling through the end stage of Parkinson's disease. She can no longer walk, sit up, or toilet herself; she's asleep more than awake; and she's in the process of deciding where she will live now that she needs more care than her current residence can provide. To put it bluntly, she's choosing where she will go to die.

To describe these as her "golden years" would be at best dark satire, and at worst insulting. She's not a "senior." She's not "mature." She's not "elderly." She's old.

To help myself cope with this difficult time in both our lives, I've been reading the landmark work of Elisabeth Kubler Ross *On Death and Dying*. I'm beginning to understand why we have these euphemisms, and for whose benefit.

Once upon a time in our society, death was treated as a part of life. When people had accidents, got sick or got old they stayed at home surrounded by loved ones.

While children may have been asked to "let granny rest because she's cranky today," they were not denied access to the dying. When death arrived, the whole community was involved in the accompanying rituals.

Death in our society, by contrast, is sterile. On television, it is bloodless and forgotten by

the next episode. In war, soldiers rarely meet those whose lives they end. When people have accidents or get sick, they are spirited off to hospitals where they are saved repeatedly and heroically by drugs, machines and trained personnel.

Euphemisms have one purpose: To soften the truth.

In the 20th century we have softened the truth of death so much that we can no longer face it. In conflicts all over the globe, costly weapons take thousands of civilian lives at a single blow and we speak of "collateral damage."

People get old and we refer to them as "seniors" and send them to "long term care facilities." Lives made miserable by accident, illness, or age are unnaturally extended and we praise the advances of medical science, never speaking of the cost in quality of life.

The truth is, we are scared to death of dying. We are afraid to say "old" because, in a youth-oriented society, age is a negative thing. We are afraid of "old" because being old inevitably leads to being dead.

Nobody knows what death brings. Everybody fears the unknown. There's nothing wrong with being afraid to die.

What is wrong is the disservice we do to the

dying by denying with our words and actions what they know is approaching. When we euphemize age, are we saving the feelings of those who know they are old?

Are we helping them to accept that death is as inevitable a part of life as birth? Or are we simply running from our inability to conceive of our own mortality?

Every time I visit my mother, I am reminded by her and the other residents how frightened I am of my own aging process, my own death. Yet I find myself longing to spend more and more time with her.

In fact, I've invited her to live with me, perhaps to die with me.

I am afraid of this. Yet, in facing my fear, I am finding a greater degree of peace than I've ever experienced before. I don't want to lie to my mother about the fact that she's old, and she's dying. I want to help her face it. I want to face it with her.

Someone once said: "On the other side of every fear is freedom."

Perhaps if we stopped pretending that youth could be extended indefinitely with surgery, cosmetics and overdoses of exercise; if we stopped trying to delay every death with medical heroism; if we stopped inventing new, improved ways to say, "He's old," "She died," we could help the aging and dying among us face their final fears, achieve their final freedom, and find a little freedom of our own.

Lynne Melcombe is a freelance writer. Her mother died shortly after this article was written. She was with her when she died.



By Lynne Melcombe
Special to the Citizen

PORT MOODY, S.C.

Mature. Senior citizens. The golden years. These are euphemisms for one inescapable fact: If you live long enough, you'll get old.

A few years ago I did a writing assignment that described dental care through the stages of life: Infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, pregnancy and — here there was a great deal of discussion among my supervisors as to which euphemism for "old age" would be least offensive.

Offensive to whom? Ostensibly the old. But don't the old know they're old? The young know they're young and flaunt it — why not?

The middle-aged need only look in the mirror to know that time is catching up. Surely we don't presume that the aging process itself causes people to lose a perspective on time which they have had all their lives.

We are talking about people who, a few years earlier, went to work, paid taxes, raised children, and were perfectly aware of the passage of time. Although a percentage develop Alzheimer's disease and may be unaware of their age, the majority still count birthdays and know that by most standards 75, 80, 85 years of age is getting old.

Patronizing euphemisms such as "senior citizens" and "golden years" don't loosen stiffening joints, counteract fatigue or increase diminishing appetites.

Who are these euphemisms designed not to offend?

