

Independent Musing

Another week at Lathrop which means I'm pondering the nature of independence. Not independence as in freedom from tyranny, just independence as in freedom to make one's own decisions. We all strove to earn that ability in our youth, and we treasure it still even when it means freedom to make our own bad decisions (as perhaps it always did.) I actually believe that independence is a myth; that we can only function with some degree of shared dependence. A functional society relies on the shared institutions of justice and education and health care. Even great casino developers rely on the infrastructure that shared resources provide. It seems clear that life in Lathrop has many opportunities to explore that line between independent choices and their impact on those with whom we share our world.

I received a letter recently tasking me with straightening out a few neighbors who were making what was thought to be unsafe decisions on the common roadway. While I am a believer in the safety benefits of bike helmets, I also believe that while they are still able, our residents need to be allowed to make their own choices. From Gawande's [Being Mortal](#) we learned of the struggle between seniors valuing their independence and their families valuing safety. A benefit of living in community is that we become like family. But Lathrop residents are all adults; our commitment is to encourage and witness, but not control. When our neighbors hold concern for our well-being, is there a price? Do we have a responsibility to spare other's the discomfort that comes from watching us make our choices, or watch us struggle?

There is another aspect of this question in play around the issue of shared resources, in particular regarding van trips. While use of the van has many positive social and economic benefits, for many, their dependence on the van is already a concession to dependence, a little bitter pill. Yet, whether the trip is complimentary or an optional paid outing, it is a shared resource and a shared experience. And as such, is there an assumption of responsibility for each to help make the most of the trip for all? Its one thing to be concerned for someone's mobility issues, even to feel a little impatient for their "slow going." It's quite another when someone requires considerable attention from the driver or really does need help with the demands of the trip. So the question for Lathrop staff, on behalf of all who use the van- must we limit use of the van for certain residents? Should they pay a premium? Or, is that just life in community, and we should not cheat residents of a chance to practice patience and generosity?

And then we come to issues around those residents whom we feel or judge to be unable to make good decisions about their safety and by extension, the safety of others. That is a very vague and fluid judgement. If we call it independent living, does Lathrop, that is the staff acting at the behest of the group, bear responsibility to intervene and impose services to fill in where residents may fall short? When the fire alarm goes off at the INN can everyone follow the simple plan to evacuate to the stairs or stay put until help arrives? If the answer is no, or I think not, should the community pay for extra staff to support them, or can we make having private assistance mandatory? The current contract says no. (Only 8 residents came to the advertised presentation on the topic. Is that evidence of independent judgement or not?) And so, I've communicated with the families for them to take up the question and

help make the decision if independent living is right for some residents. Can we require a resident have family or a committed proxy as a condition for being independent?

Another week at Lathrop, asking what I hope are questions that matter to us all.