



SENIORS FOR SOCIAL ACTION (ONTARIO)

How Can I Serve? Some Insights on Becoming an Active Elder

By John Lord

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During recent talks on my new book, I have been asked two interesting questions. “How can I get involved with these aging issues?” and “What can our community do?” These questions show that many older people want to be more engaged. “How can I serve?” has been a question that people have pondered for generations, and it gets to the heart of how change occurs. People’s voices and actions matter on social issues. *Engaged citizens and collective awareness have always been central to shifting cultural norms.*

One of the stumbling blocks to engagement in social issues is the cycle of complaining, negativity, and hopelessness that is very common among dissatisfied seniors. As a caregiver and advocate, I know how easy it is to get stuck in a negative mode. Through conversations with other elders, I have heard a huge number of complaints about elder care in recent years. This is understandable, given the amount of ageism and the limited capacity of community-based systems of care in Canada. There is much to be upset about, especially with governments that have the wrong priorities and that fail to put elders and their families at the forefront of care.

Constant complaining, negativity, and hopelessness, while understandable, can keep us in a cycle of insecurity. It can also limit our interest and energy in exploring things that might lead to personal and collective action. Negativity and a sense of hopelessness can also lead to indifference, which usually leads to disengagement or lack of involvement. As Canadian anthropologist Wade Davis has said, “Despair is an insult to the imagination.”

When I was growing up, my mother would sometimes say, “Stop complaining, do something.” ‘Do something’ as a mantra is fine, but most of us need insight into what that might mean for our daily lives.

As we think about “how to serve,” we need to move from negativity and hopelessness to curiosity and connection.

The starting point for curiosity is understanding the reality of your situation. You can start by being a witness to your own life, both internal and external. Be curious about yourself. Why am I feeling so negative or angry or hopeless? What is frustrating for me or my community? What am I passionate about and want to change? What possibilities are there for me to get more involved?

As you reflect, consider what is within your sphere of influence and what is not. As Dorothy Day, the famous American activist, used to say, “The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart.” An open heart creates space for curiosity and connection. Curiosity is about noticing, looking at yourself and the world and deciding how you can be involved in a meaningful way. This involves finding a role for yourself that will give you energy. Be curious as you consider where you might be involved. Here are some experiences that fellow elders have recently shared with me:

- *Doing more personal planning for my future as an older person.* I think of this as the importance of ‘staying ahead of the curve.’
- *Becoming a more resilient caregiver.* Despite its low priority, providing care is one of the most important things we can do.
- *Connecting with an isolated neighbour.* Personal connections are vital to addressing loneliness and social isolation.
- *Discussing ageism with family and friends.* Conversations about ageism help to persuade more people to understand why we need change.
- *Starting a NORC (naturally occurring retirement community).* Building this kind of natural support is vital to expanding and reforming elder care.
- *Writing letters to my political representatives.* Politicians are greatly influenced by their constituents; advocacy can make a difference.
- *Sitting on a local committee that is working for change.* Local initiatives, whether with a senior’s group, a NORC, or an Age Friendly Community committee build local capacity for change.

As your curiosity expands and you begin to consider options for your involvement, you can explore connections that will enable you to be an active elder.

WHO Questions are central to this process of engagement. Ask who is currently involved with this issue, locally or provincially? Who would understand my situation? Who can I reach out to learn more about the issue? *Connections are the lifeblood of an active elderly life.* We are social beings. Connections enhance our capacity to be active, but also expand our social networks. A friend of mine in her eighties says, “My favorite outcome of helping is the social connections that are developed. This is a great anti-depressant!”

As we age, there are many reasons to withdraw from community life. Yet, doing so can have dire consequences for our health and well-being. Research is now clear that engagement and relationships contribute to meaning and well-being. Transforming ageism and elder care requires all of us to become aware and engaged in the issues. Be curious about your own life and the lives of fellow elders. Have conversations with your friends and family. Find senior activists in your community. If you live in Ontario, Seniors for Social Action Ontario likely has a dozen or more members in your community.

I often hear “Isn’t trying to change long-term care a lost cause?” I have pondered this question, and think, “No, it is not a lost cause, it is a long cause.” Consider the anti-racism movement, which has been active for 200 years. Now that is a long cause!! On a positive note, Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Our change efforts are a marathon, not a sprint.

Becoming active and serving does not have to be all serious business. I have gradually learned over the years that bringing joy to this work helps to balance the heartbreak that often comes from care giving and advocacy. Let’s laugh and sing together as we participate in and contribute to a cause that will benefit us now as well as future generations. As you begin to serve, you will be part of an important collective effort for change!

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