ABSTRACT. The traditional way of caring for frail elders in long-term care facilities is based in the medical model. This type of care focuses primarily on the biological needs of individual elders. A new paradigm for these care facilities is seen in the idea of culture change. This paradigm implicitly has within it elements of compassion emphasized in the teachings of world religions. The focus of this article is on the thoughts of Hesston College students in a World Religions class who spent two hours a week during the spring term 2003 interacting with frail elders in a long-term care facility. These intergenerational interactions are analyzed from the perspective of six world religions. The article concludes with reference to culture change and intergenerational relationships as related to practitioners, policy makers, and researchers.

KEYWORDS. College students, frail elders, religions of the world, culture change
The individualism that pervades most of contemporary western society runs counter to the quintessential teachings of the major world religions. These teachings suggest we are to have compassion for others—especially people who are weak and/or live on the margins of society. The individualism of the West is seen in the way that frail elders are treated. This is especially true in long-term care residential settings. The traditional policy of these institutions regarding care of their residents is based in the medical model. This model focuses on the biological needs of the individual elder who typically lives in spiritual, intellectual, and emotional isolation. By way of contrast, culture change, a growing movement throughout the United States and other parts of the world, seeks to meet a wide variety of needs and maximize the choices of elders. This is done within the context of community—both within and outside of the care facility. Culture change, to some degree, is pragmatically driven. It is about cost-saving measures and in anticipation of the aging of the baby-boomers. Culture change also reflects a philosophy of care that overlaps with the teachings about compassion seen in world religions. This new paradigm for the care of frail elders involves a call for making these settings a more humane place in which to live. Intergenerational involvement is a key part of this process. Relationships between the generations have been an organically integrated, informal part of most societies throughout history. In the 21st century such relationships typically need to be formally and strategically structured. Thus, the intergenerational assignment discussed in this article was created.

Students, aged 18-21, in the World Religions course I teach at Hesston College, Hesston, Kansas, have the option of being involved in intergenerational activities and culture change at the Schowalter Villa Retirement Community. (The other assignment for students is to make weekly reports on videos about religion seen in class.) Expected outcomes for students in this intergenerational assignment include: development of a greater appreciation for the value of frail elders; increased understanding of culture change; application of the religious ideals of compassion in interaction with frail elders; and written reflection of their work that promotes analysis and understanding of what they learn about these ideals.

Schowalter Villa is located about five hundred yards from the college and has close to one hundred residents in long-term care. This past term, spring 2003, twenty out of sixty students in this class chose this assign-
In their work, students interacted with the frail elders two hours a week for eleven weeks. This involvement included feeding and pushing wheel chairs of the most frail, participation in intergenerational small groups discussions, playing bingo, and celebrating holidays such as Valentine’s Day with the elders. Students wrote a three hundred word reflection of their experience each week. A primary focus of this article is presentation of selected reflections of the students in terms of their involvement at the Villa. Quintessential ideas related to caring for others from six world religions are inserted between the reflections of the students. These world religions are Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

As long as we continue to divide the world into the strong and the weak, the helpers and the helped, the givers and the receivers, the independent and the dependent, real (helping) will not be possible, because we keep broadening the dividing line caused by the suffering of the (elders) in the first place.

Student interaction with frail elders at Schowalter Villa helps to get at the concern of Nouwen and Gaffney seen in this quote. Elders and students provide help to each other as will be seen in this article.

**RATIONALE**

The assignment in the World Religions course in terms of students interacting with frail elders is given for various reasons. First, this work
provides students and elders an intergenerational forum for interaction that is meaningful to both groups. Intergenerational encounters often provide wisdom for youth and a new look at history. Moreover, this provides new opportunities for continued growth of elders. Young adults typically develop positive views of frail elders—counteracting their own negative stereotypes that most Americans have of aging. In addition, students working with frail elders bear witness to quintessential ideas of love seen in the ideals of world religions. This in itself is a worthwhile learning. Students who claim a religion realize that religions other than their own have something of value. Most of the students in the class are Christian. A few claim no religious affiliation. The assignment usually leads to a more positive view of other religions and cultures. This is important for Christian students who typically hold negative views about other religions—especially Islam. While developing their work throughout the term students engage in a type of internal interfaith dialogue. Moreover, they seek to make intergenerational application of the principles of compassion seen in the religions studied in class.

The assignment helps students understand and participate in the concept of culture change. It takes students out of the classroom. It allows them to be citizens involved in development of the societal fabric. In written work for this assignment, students develop critical thinking skills that involve reflection, analysis, and application of what they learn in class to their lives.

**STUDENTS INTERACTION WITH FRAIL ELDERS AT SCHOWALTER VILLA AND IDEALS FROM WORLD RELIGIONS**

Here, student reflections are taken from the weekly written reports that were part of their assignment in being involved with elders at the Villa. These reflections illustrate learning on the part of students. In addition, the thoughts and feelings of the students provide examples of benefits for student and elder from this intergenerational interaction. Between student comments, verses from scriptures or ideas about religions used in this study are interspersed. As noted above, these religions are Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Student reflections are noted in italics to distinguish them from the scriptures of or observations about these religions.
**Hinduism**

Within the Hindu belief system there are millions of gods with a few of these gods being most important. One such god is Krishna. Hindus believe Krishna has been incarnated in different forms at different times in history. One example of his life on earth is recorded in *The Song of God: The Bhagavad Gita* (Prabhavananda and Isherwood, 1972). As seen in this text (p. 50), Krishna says:

> When goodness grows weak  
> When evil increases,  
> I make myself a body.  
> In every age I come back.

Perhaps the work of students at Schowalter Villa are expressions of Krishna as seen in the writing of S.T. and other students (students are identified by initials). S.T.:

> During my time at the Villa, I had the opportunity to capture, by way of photographs the lives of the residents that live there. At first, I was not sure how I would feel spending two hours a week at the Villa. In this work, I have learned that this simple act of photography can make a masterpiece of memories. This project has been a great help to me through God’s heart. Throughout this experience, I felt nothing but compassion for the elders I encountered.

In *The Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna is talking to Arjuna, the mortal. Set in a battlefield of related kin groups, the deity is telling Arjuna that the latter must be involved in life’s struggle. While this story may be used for justifying war, Mahatma Ghandi saw it as a parable for the struggle that occurs within the mind. Krishna tells Arjuna that he must practice Karma Yoga—that is, compassionate service to others. This action is to be done for the sake of itself. Nothing is to be gained for oneself (May, 1988).

In a series of “I am” statements, Krishna (Prabhavananda and Isherwood, 1972, p. 82) says:

> I am the end of the path, the witness  
> the Lord, the sustainer:
I am the place of the abode  
the beginning, the friend and the refuge.

In the interaction of youth and age there are lessons about beginnings and endings, life and death, friendship—becoming a refuge for another person in their times of storm. Youth provide lessons for the elders—lessons about what it means to be young today in the 21st century. These lessons suggest that there are young people who focus outside of themselves in caring of frail elders. More often then not, accounts of students at the end of this term noted what the elders did for the students.

L.W.:

*I think that the main thing I learned in working at Schowalter Villa this semester was that frail elders are as human as anyone. Before this assignment, I thought older people in nursing homes were boring. When I thought of old people, I thought of mean people who didn’t want help. I have always thought them to be less than anyone else because they seemed dull. Going to the Villa for 11 weeks changed that. Older people have lots to offer younger people. We can go to them and listen to their stories and see how they impact our lives. Elders have wisdom because they have lived so long. We should consider ourselves lucky to be able to interact with these individuals.*

**Buddhism**

Buddhism is sometimes seen as a belief system of infinite compassion based upon Buddha’s experience of enlightenment 2,500 years ago. Soon after his enlightenment, Buddha understood he was to serve those whose “souls whose eyes were sorely dimmed by dust”. . . humanity—desperately in need of help. Buddha knew he was born for the good of the many, for the compassion of the world” (Pratt, 1928, pp. 8, 9). Many frail elders are dimmed by this dusk, they are desperately in need of help.

As seen in an interview as part of the PBS video series, “Searching for God in America,” His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama, suggests that one way to exercise compassion is to welcome the suffering of another person. “The (office) of the Dali Lama is a receiving station toward which the compassion-principle of Buddhism in all its cosmic amplitude is continuously channeled, radiate thence to the Tibetan people
most directly, but by extension to all sentient beings” (Smith, p. 144). Students who help at the Villa may be said to be receiving stations for the pain felt by elders. One is amazed by the nature of this reception. It has the essence of “cosmic amplitude.”

There are two main strains of Buddhism—Theravada and the Mahayana. The former is more conservative than its’ counter-part. Theravada takes more literally Buddha’s atheism and adheres to his de-emphasis on religious life. Mahayana Buddhism allows for a wide diversity of theism and religious practice. The Mahayana sees the ideal person as a bodhisattva. The latter is seen as an individual who puts others’ happiness before his or her own. (For Theravada Buddhist there is a very limited number of bodhisattvas, while for Mayhayans the number is almost infinite).

In our usual ignorant state we look after ourselves as “number one” and concern ourselves with other sentient beings as a secondary matter. The bodhisattava practices the reverse of this . . . putting off one’s own nirvana (full eternal bliss) even though one has become pure enough to attain it, for anything approaching the imaginable future. The bodhisattava dedicates his or her practice, in this and all subsequent lives, for the good of all sentient being, “until samsara (the many passages of all life forms via reincarnation) is emptied.” (Corless, 1989, pp. 41-42)

Responding to this idea R.T. noted:

Through my work at Schowalter Villa I was able to identify myself as a doer of good. I was able to help the helpless and weak. I feel honored to have done this in addition to developing profound respect for elders accepting my helping hand. I am most thankful for this experience.

A poem by Mayhayanist poet-saint, Shantideva, reflects the nature of the bodhisattava.

May I quench with rains of food and drink the anguish of hunger and thirst;
May I be in the famine of the age’s end their drink and meat (my italics) . . .
My own being and my pleasures, all my righteousness in the past, present, and future, I surrender indifferently,
that all creatures may win through to their end.
(Smith, 1991, p. 123)

The words “the age’s end their drink and meat” are italicized because they represent what Hesston students did in feeding the very frail—students gave drink and meat to the elders near the end of the elders’ life. Feeding the very frail is often not easy. The elders sometimes say unkind words or vomit on the person who is helping them. After an elder vomited on one of the students, he wrote, “Why should I be upset about that? Vomiting is just a natural act.” Occasionally, the elder will choke on a piece of food. Giving this help is not for the faint of heart. At first glance, its seems like work that has no immediate pay-off. Yet in writing about his helping elders, B.T. said:

*In serving elders at the Villa I learned an incredible amount about myself and helping others. I learned that it doesn’t matter who we help, people of all ages need help. Going to the Villa gave me confidence in helping those around me without expecting anything in return. To help in that way and give of my time was something I thought I would never do. But it was something that grew on me and showed me a lot about my character. I learned what you think might be the worst for you might be the best for you. I was able to learn who the elders are and what they miss about their earlier lives. I was able to talk about the similarities and differences between today and many years ago.*

**Confucianism**

The primary concern of Confucius was social ethics rather than religious thought. Key words in this ethical system as seen in *The Analects* of Confucius are Jen, Rén, and Li. Jen may be translated goodness and love. It focuses upon the ideal relationship between two people. Rén refers to benevolence, humanity, and kindness. This is the fundamental virtue of Confucianism. Li refers to propriety and good manners. . . . (Mathews’ Chinese-English Dictionary, 1972) (http://www.friesian.com/confuci.htm#text-2).

It was out of this ethical system that the Chinese concept of filial piety (or, literally in Chinese, “honoring your parents”) developed. The English denotative definition for this piety is broader, referring to re-
spect for elders in general. Chinese filial piety was especially for old men, in part because this culture was dependent on agriculture and old men knew most about this subject. Older women gained from this cultural reality. “Even the bitterly oppressed women profited from the rise in status that came with age; an old woman had a much higher status than the young of either sex, and she controlled the bringing up of grandchildren” (deBeauvoir, 1972:91-92).

S.B., a student, in referring to the writing of Confucius commented:

*I found a verse in The Analects (1:6) where Confucius said: “A young man should serve his parents at home and be respectful to elders outside the home. He should be earnest and truthful, loving all, but become intimate with Jen. After doing this, if he has energy to spare, he can study literature and art” (Confucius, 2003). (http://www.human.toyogakuenu.ac.jp/~acmuller/contao/analects.htm)*

*I think that this scripture relates to my helping at Schowalter Villa because when working there I needed to be respectful of elders and love them. From the Villa project, I learned to care for frail elders. This reminds me to care for my parents in the same way.*

In reflecting upon her experience, A.P. wrote:

*I have learned how lonely elders can get living in an institution such as the Villa. Their families are so far away or live close by but may never see the elders. It is easy to understand that they feel unwanted. When I helped at the Villa the staff worked hard to care for the elders but I detected in the elder eyes that they would have preferred family members to be with them. It did them good when college kids would visit with them. We might have reminded them of their own grandchildren or even their kids when they were our age. The college kids seemed to bring a sense of joy to the eyes of the elders.*

A.P.’s comments remind us that American society doesn’t possess a high degree of filial piety. The culture change movement is trying to restore filial piety to a greater extent within assisted living areas for frail elders.
Judaism

The Hebrew prophets seen in the Bible developed in bold terms the ideas of social justice. The prophets Hosea, Micah, Jeremiah and other prophets shared one common belief:

... the conviction that every human being, simply by virtue of his or her humanity is a child of God and therefore in possession of rights that even Kings must respect. . . . So it is that wherever men and women have gone to history for encouragement and inspiration in the age-long struggle for justice, they have found it more than anywhere else in the ringing proclamation of these prophets. (Smith, 1991, p. 292)

The prophet Micah (6-8) said:

(The Lord) . . . has told you, O man, what is good;
And what does the Lord require of you
But to do justice, love kindness
And walk humbly with your God
To love God, walk humbly with thy Lord? (New American Standard Bible, 1973, p. 1299)


The ideas seen in Jewish scriptures are reflected in the following statement by T.L.:

The work I have done at the Villa has been rewarding and I believe that the people I have worked with have appreciated my work. The people that I met during this project were people that I would not have met if it were not for this project; they were very kind and needed my help. By doing this project, I have learned that we have a responsibility to serve those that need our help. I have learned that the very frail elders have a need to be with people. They need to be in a vibrant community. I have learned that sometimes the people who need the most help are right next to us.
In sharing their life history, I learned a great amount of history that is never taught in schools. I have learned that the last stage of life can be difficult—or, very pleasant where there is some one who cares. I now know that there is still a great amount to do in culture change—social justice to be done in the name of frail elders—and what we students helped with at the Villa is just the beginning of something significant in terms of care for frail elders.

S.O.’s comments reflect her change in attitude about frail elders. She sees their humanity—not their frailty. S’s thought—especially on seeing these elders as fully human—reflect ideas seen in the Hebrew prophetic voices:

\[ I \text{ learned a lot throughout my time of working at the Villa. One of the main things that I learned is about myself. I have never been comfortable around older people. Working at the Villa has been a humbling experience for me. This experience shows me that frail elders are normal people, they are human beings. I have always been afraid of them. By my going over to the Villa and having to interact with elders has helped me overcome this fear.} \]

Christianity

The Christian New Testament is replete with emphasis on compassion. Matthew 25:31-46 is a classic scripture in terms of this subject. In this text, Jesus suggests that when we help the homeless, the naked, the poor, the outcast, we are serving him.

In commenting on Matthew 25, J.T. wrote:

\[ \ldots \text{In (this scripture), Jesus talks about the importance of helping the hungry, the oppressed, the naked and the prisoner. He could just as well have been talking about frail older Americans who live out the last years of life in a nursing home. It is my impression that these elders represent modern day lepers. Frail elders need the same kind of treatment that we all do. They need to be accepted and appreciated. There were residents at the Villa that would talk about when they were in college or on the job. I saw pride in their eyes when they talked about these things.} \]
Another Christian scripture which touches on the subject of this type of compassion and love is that seen in I Corinthians 13. The following are verses from this chapter:

Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous, love does not brag . . . (verse 4)
(Love) bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things . . . (verse 7)
Love never fails . . . (verse 8)
. . . now abide faith, hope, and these three, but the greatest of these is love. (verse 13) (*New American Standard Bible*, 1973, pp. 268-269)

Referring to this scripture as it relates to student work at the Villa, A.W. wrote:

*I believe this relates to our work at Villa because we did it out of love. We helped out people who couldn’t help out themselves. Love is what makes the world go round. I know from personal experience that when we went to the Villa, it was something the elders really looked forward to, it was one of their bright points of the day.*

**Islam**

As with other world religions, compassion is at the heart of Islam (this, despite what terrorists do in the name of Islam). The Islamic holy book the Qur’an (1998) in Surah 4:36 reads:

Serve Allah, and join not any partners with Him; and do good—to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbors who are of kin neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the way-farers (ye meet), and what your right hand possess: for Allah loves not the arrogant, the vainglorious;

In reflection on this scripture, J.C. said:

*This scripture relates to my service at the Villa in several ways. It states that we need to do good to others. This verse tells us it doesn’t matter if someone is old, rich, or poor, we should treat everyone equally and be good neighbors to all our neighbors. That is*
what I did helping frail elders and showing them the respect they deserve. It was not a service for money but a service based in a good cause. Indeed the Qur’an supports the idea of helping people who are in need and share what we have with the rest of the world.

The Qur’an (1998, p. 579) in Surah 107 states:

In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.
Seest thou one who denies the Judgement (to come) (verse 1).
Then such is the one who repulses the orphan (verse 2),
And encourages not the feeding of the indigent (verse 3).
So woe to the worshippers (verse 4).
Who are neglectful of their Prayers (verse 5).
Those who (want but) to be seen (verse 6).
But refuse (to supply) (even) neighborly needs (verse 7).

Regarding this passage from the Qur’an, R.T. wrote:

I see this as saying woe to those who refuse to help others. This relates to my work at the Villa because what I was doing there was helping others who are in great need.

IMPLICATION FOR PRACTITIONERS, POLICY MAKERS, AND RESEARCHERS

The value of culture change in long-term care facilities will most likely grow as the U.S. population continues to age. The MetLife Market Survey on Nursing Homes and Home Care Cost (2002) reports that 6.4 million people aged 65 or older need long-term care. The same report notes that people age 65 or older face a 40 percent chance of being placed in a long-term care facility. In this process we need development of culture change for frail elders in which intergenerational involvement is a significant part.

While there are start-up costs for developing culture change (for example, training staff) it appears that in the long run, costs of long-term care facilities employing culture change decreases. Diana Reese (2001) in describing the Crestview Nursing Home in Missouri suggests that the culture change program at that site has made savings annually in $500,000 in its Medicaid costs and $20,000 in its food budget. Perhaps more significantly, the quality of life of Crestview’s residences has im-
proved. For example, there are significantly fewer prescribed medicines for residents and far fewer elders experience weight loss.

Policy makers should be aware of the benefits intergenerational interaction within the context of culture change. It helps elders get away from spiritual, intellectual, and spiritual isolation often felt in long-term care facilities. It helps youth feel they contribute to others and helps to evaluate their negative stereotypes of frail elders. Elders are more likely to have a more positive self-concept in interaction with young people.

Intergenerational education in culture change calls for curriculum change in the education of medical personnel, administrators, religious leaders, social workers–any group that works with elders in long-term facilities. The Latin word educatus, from which the word education stems, means to “lead-out.” In education at its best, new individuals are led out of the former self. At least implicit examples of this are seen in the reflections of students seen in this article.

Policy makers and practitioners need to make use of the recent findings about the human brain in late life. The video series “The Secret Life of the Brain” (2002) sums up the research regarding this subject:

Overturning decades of dogma, scientists recently discovered that even into our 70s, our brain continues producing new neurons . . . The normal aging process leaves most brains in tact, and may even provide the brain with unique advantages that form the basis for wisdom.

Questions need to be asked about what this new understanding of the brain in older adults means for intergeneration education. In response to these questions, appropriate intergenerational relationships need to be developed. The interaction of college students in light of world religions is one such intergenerational relationship.

Research is needed regarding the value of intergenerational relationships in the development of culture change in long-term care facilities for frail elders. This research helps practitioners and policy makers in assessing the worth of culture change as it involves the interaction of different generations. During the academic year (2003-2004), plans are to measure quantitatively the effects of intergenerational interaction upon students in the World Religions class and the frail elders at Schowalter Villa. This interaction will be similar to that described in this article. The research will use a pre-test and post-test based upon the Bandura’s Self-Efficacy Paradigm. Self-efficacy refers to a person’s ability to effectively deal with his/her environment. This includes beliefs a person
has about how they can make a positive difference in their own life and the life of others. The Perceived Competence and Functioning Inventory (PCFI) will be used in this research. In PCFI measurement scales include role competence, self-competence, and relational cognition (Bandura, 1997). The hypothesis of this research will be that the college students and the frail elders will increase in their sense of self-efficacy evidenced in intergenerational interaction.

**SUMMARY**

Young adult college students in the World Religions course at Hesston College have the opportunity of serving frail elders in the long-term care facilities at Schowalter Villa. This is done in the context of culture change, a movement seeking to maximize the choices for frail elders along with meeting as many of their needs as is possible. A central theme of this article is that a quintessential teaching of world religions is that we are to provide compassionate service to others.

A few shortened quotes from students regarding their interaction with frail elder recapitulates what both the elders and the students gained in their service at the Villa.

I feel honored to do have done this in addition to developing profound respect for elders accepting my helping hand.

Older people have lots to offer . . . We should consider ourselves lucky to be able to interact with these individuals.

(We) college kids seemed to bring a sense of joy to the eyes of the elders.

Going to the Villa gave me confidence in helping those around me without expecting anything in return.

I now know that there is still a great amount to do in culture change–social justice to be done in the name of frail elders.

While intergenerational relationships throughout most of history were intrinsically built into society, such relationships today need to be formally developed. This is seen in the work with Hesston students with Villa elders.
Strategically created intergenerational relationships are fundamental to the nature of culture change. The value of intergenerational relationships need to be built into the formal education of individuals who serve or will serve frail elders. Policy makers and practitioners need to see the value of culture change both in terms of the demographics of age and as a matter of social justice. As part of this process, research needs to be developed about the value added nature of intergenerational relationships as part of culture change. The impressions seen in the work of college students with frail elders suggests it is valuable to both age groups. The next step in this work is to quantitatively measure this value.

REFERENCES


NOTES

1. www.ksu.edu/peak is an excellent Website for an explanation of culture change.
2. World religions are defined here as those religions that have membership of millions of people and possess sacred scriptures. Such religions not covered here include Taoism, Sikhism, and Jainism. Books relevant to the subject of compassion and world religions are Stephen G. Post’s (2002) Unlimited Love: Altruism, Compassion, and Service and Sir John Templeton’s Pure Unlimited Love: An Eternal Creative Force and Blessing Taught by All Religions

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