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Never Knew You Well

Picture it: drafty, fetid, thin-walled rooms; televised talk shows masking the groans and mutterings of bent spines as they hobble between mattress, toilet, and plug-in hot plate. With pension funds in the United States down two trillion dollarsⁱ and more than five million seniors living below the poverty line,ⁱⁱ we squander our human wealth, forsaking the aged precisely when we should be thanking them for their productive career years. In contrast, my three-part solution would embrace retirees as assets—environmental, economic, and social—to both kin and country.

First, the year 2016 promises a profound confluence of developments: The first wave of Baby Boomers will turn seventy; the price of oil will be astronomical; and a single thermo-depolymerization (TDP) facility (sponsored by our Environmental Protection Agency) will be able to convert 200 tons of fresh bowel, entrail, and viscera into 500 barrels of clean-burning fuel oil per day.ⁱⁱⁱ In this way, we can relieve the misery of 880,000 indigents and extract, from that 96,800 tons of senior, a domestic oil yield of 107,556 barrels per year.^{iv} Now, I realize that hydrogen, wind, and solar power are the current darlings of the sustainable-energy movement, but the technology necessary for their large-scale utilization is expensive and years away, while TDP (which simply mimics and accelerates our planet's own geological processes) is both cheap and immediately feasible. Beyond the political advantage of reducing foreign-oil dependency, families could avoid the strain and drain of grandma's inevitable decline and sell her remains at peak value in a thriving, competitive market. I am fully aware that a few radical traditionalists will object to such innovation; the sentimental may choose to employ their resources closer to home; the cautious may hesitate to invest their inheritance in the energy industry which, it must be owned, has generated some public skepticism. For this reluctant minority, my proposal features the ecological option of freeze-drying the corpse via liquid nitrogen, then pulverizing it into an odorless powder for ceremonial purposes and, ultimately, soil amendment. Such wide scale composting could reinvigorate private tree-planting and pride of garden ownership while bringing, quite literally, new life to the funeral industry with advances in private processing.

Second, with a 42.9 trillion dollar shortfall projected for Social Security and Medicare over the next seventy-five years,^v our nation's current policy is not sufficiently compassionate or fiscally sound to cope with aging citizens'

need for long-term care. Who among us has not witnessed the anguish of an elderly person, shunted between hospital bed and nursing facility, tormented by failing organs, bereft of the recognition of loved ones and then finally accorded an undignified regression to spoon-feeding and diapers? Who has not witnessed the prolonged agony of a beloved grandpappy who should be remembered for his jokes and whittlin' rather than for the vomiting, narcotic stupor of his final days? With my humble solution, the seventieth birthday could mark not a prophecy of pain, but a culminating civic contribution, duly commemorated with the mercy of a peaceful death. Our nation's healthier, wealthier seniors could then enjoy a robust economy not depleted—but supplemented—by their povertous peers. (Middle-class seniors are shrinking in number such that their cases can be individually administered.)

Third, the elderly account for twenty percent of the self-inflicted deaths in our country, with depression as the leading risk factor.^{vi} Not only would my plan reduce opportunities for senior suicide, but it would also lessen the public expense of dubious “lifestyle” programs (diet, exercise, cultural, and intellectual engagement). As executives in corporate healthcare will attest, my solution provides a necessary check on the too-awesome power of doctors to make crucial medical decisions about recovery prospects and end-of-life care. It also would stem the heinous practice of assisted suicide, whereby interested parties, acting under the guises of mercy, administer lethal doses of “medicine” or remove life-support. Some will argue that the right to die is a fundamental freedom, but I ask, should we not first protect vulnerable citizens from those who would taint life-and-death deliberations with pecuniary matters?

In conclusion, I wish to state that I stand no personal gain in promoting this necessary agenda, as my retired father is sound in mind, body, and pocketbook, and my mother died nobly and unselfishly (stroke, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, breast cancer, lupus, chemical sensitivity, and prolonged hopelessness) before her time.^{vii}

i “Retirement Accounts Have Lost \$2 Trillion So Far” *San Francisco Examiner* 7 October 2008

ii “Newly Released 2009 COLA Forecast Would Keep Five Million Seniors Below Poverty Line”

<http://www.reuters.com/article/pressRelease/idUS169751+14-Feb-2008+PRN20080214>

iii “Turkey Fuel? Factory to Turn Turkey Guts Into Crude Oil” *National Geographic News* 25 November 2003

iv Lisa K. Buchanan, conservative estimate

v “Congress in No Rush to Fix Medicare and Social Security” *Christian Science Monitor* 27 March 2008

vi “Facts About Depression in Older Adults” American Psychological Association <http://www.apa.org/ppo/issues/olderdepressfact.html>

vii Author’s mother, d. 28 November 1989, age 68