

# REVIEWS MORE

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**WHAT ARE OLD PEOPLE FOR? HOW ELDERS WILL SAVE THE WORLD.** By WILLIAM H. THOMAS, M.D. Acton, MA: Vanderwyk & Burnham, 370 pages, 2004, \$24.95. **REVIEW AVAILABLE ONLINE @ [www.srvip.org](http://www.srvip.org)**

Reviewed by Judith Sandys

WILLIAM H. THOMAS is a physician who specializes in working with older people or, to be more specific, with very old people, many of whom reside in nursing homes. He teaches a course on geriatrics to medical students. He has, in his own words, “devoted years of [his] life to ‘fixing’ nursing homes.”

This is an ambitious book, which deals with aging from a variety of perspectives. In his preface, the author suggests that issues of aging “define some of the most important risks and opportunities that confront our society” (xii) and that freeing ourselves “from the shackles of fear and prejudice” around aging “can and will save the world.” The book draws on many sources. While it may well be of interest to those working with elderly people, it is designed for a general audience—including all of us who are, or expect one day to become, old ourselves.

The book is divided into eight chapters, titled: *True Longevity*, *Becoming Human*, *The Rise of Elderhood*, *Navigating Life*, *Tragedy*, *Distant Thunder*, *A Wink and a Smile*, and *The Ripening*. Each chapter is further divided into a number of short sections. Also of interest are an appendix entitled “The First Green Houses” and 28 pages of notes which clarify, provide examples, or cite the source of material presented in the text.

In the first five chapters, Thomas outlines and critiques typical societal perceptions of elderly people and, relatedly, the way elderly people are so often treated. He discusses the profound devaluation of aging and elderly people within our obsessively youth-oriented culture, the myths and stereotypes that surround aging, how elderly peo-

ple have been perceived and treated historically, how aging fits within the life cycle. Throughout these chapters, Thomas challenges the reader to think about aging and elderly people from a different perspective, to focus on the positive roles elders have played throughout history and the significant contributions they have made to the advancement of civilization.

The last three chapters take a different direction. In these, Thomas outlines alternative approaches to supporting elderly people, discusses some of the issues he feels need to be addressed in order for change to occur, and indicates why he feels that elders are so important to society.

The strength of this book is in its ability to challenge the traditional way that we tend to conceptualize aging. There is much in the first few chapters that will resonate with those familiar with SRV theory. Thomas presents a clear and compelling analysis of how the strong societal value placed on youth leads to the devaluation of elderly people. He notes that reducing the aging process to its “mechanics”—describing the decline and fall of cells, tissues and organs—reflects “a steadfast denial of the essential humanity of old age” (33).

However, while there are some very positive aspects to the first five chapters, the remaining chapters are very disappointing. Despite the alternative view of aging that Thomas has sought to present in the beginning chapters, the later chapters are fraught with negative and stereotypical assumptions about what old people want and need. Further, his penchant for inventing new words and the somewhat ‘new age’ mystical tone of much of the discussion is more than a little disconcerting.

The sixth chapter, entitled *Distant Thunder*, discusses a number of approaches favoured by Thomas. One of these is the ‘Eden Alternative,’ essentially an effort to create better institutions. Facilities that operate according to the principles of the Eden Alternative seek to address the three

major plagues of institutions, identified here as loneliness, helplessness and boredom. The strategy for addressing these invariably involves introducing animals, plants and children into the institutional environment.

Thomas also discusses the concepts of 'intentional communities' and 'Green Houses.' He defines an intentional community as one where "a group of unrelated people come together in order to share the deliberate pursuit of some noble aim." A Green House is "an intentional community for elders built to a residential scale and devoted to the pursuit of the most positive elderhood possible."

All the alternatives outlined by Thomas are based on the premise that elderly people need to live together and that they need paid people to support them. While there is a discussion of connecting elders with the broader community, there is no recognition of the impact of segregated services. Initiatives which connect elders with children are seen as particularly positive, with no understanding of negative image implications of this juxtaposition on elders who may already be at risk of being perceived as in their second childhood. Words like "intentional community," "green houses" and (my favourite) "sanctuary" paint a picture that is at odds with the realities of these kinds of environments. Invented words like shahabaz/shabazim, convivium and eldertopia are used in a failed attempt to suggest that something truly new and remarkable is being suggested. (A shabaz is a person who is paid to protect, sustain and nurture the elders with whom they work, while convivium refers to "the sharing of good food with people we know well" [265]).

The final chapter tries to wrap things up by presenting a "reconstructed" approach to elderhood which focuses on all that elders have to offer and envisioning a world in which elders are truly a valued part of the community—the state which he refers to as Eldertopia. Here, Thomas comments on the positive contributions that elders can make—as peacemakers, as the source of wisdom, as the creators of a 'legacy'—and which can be passed down to future generations.

He writes: "Our longevity exists, has meaning, and creates value because it provides human beings with a mechanism for improving the lives of people of all ages" (302). Unfortunately, much of what he says appears at odds with this statement.

Despite its serious limitations, there were some high moments in this book. As we get older, most of us experience some limitations in our physical abilities along with an ever increasing number of aches and pains. Even when we continue to be active and involved, we begin to dread the ever increasing decline that we associate with old age. It is difficult not to get caught up in societal views of aging. It is good to be reminded of some of the positive aspects of aging, to know we are a source of support to our adult children, to delight in our grandchildren, to be involved in our communities, to continue to try to make the world (or at least a small piece of it) a better place.

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**THE PLAGUE AND I.** By BETTY MACDONALD. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1948 (2nd impression). **REVIEW AVAILABLE ONLINE @ [www.srvip.org](http://www.srvip.org)**

**Reviewed by Susan Thomas**

THIS WAS WRITTEN by the same author of *The Egg and I*; this book title is apparently a play on words of the previous one. The book is actually quite humorous, even though it tells of the author's contracting tuberculosis (TB), and of her subsequent stay in a TB sanatorium in Washington State, about two hours outside Seattle, called The Pines. She never tells the exact date of this occurrence,

but it is presumably sometime in the 1930s, because she reports of several Japanese inmates in the sanatorium, and if this had happened in the 1940s they would presumably have been segregated in some other setting because of the world war. As noted, the book is quite funny, though the wit is often of the tragic-comic, acid kind, sometimes even gallows humor. Below are a few elements of the story that are relevant to Social Role Valorization (SRV).

For newcomers, the sanatorium insisted on complete bedrest, including no talking, laughing, sitting up, or moving at all. This was done in order to rest the diseased lung because it was believed that only when the lung was fully at rest could the tubercular part be safely walled off (done surgically) from the rest of the body, and that any unnecessary movement of the tubercular organ sent the germs coursing through the rest of the body. The rooms were also kept cool, even cold, as was the water, and the windows and doors were constantly open to the air, even in the winter. Thus, at least in the Bedrest Hospital (for the sickest patients), the patients were constantly cold, and nothing would be done to make them warmer. Institutional deindividualization is illustrated by one patient explaining why everything was kept so cold: “somebody decided that the average patient could keep warm in this temperature and with this number of blankets and if you can’t then that is your problem” (p. 56).

The rules of the sanatorium constantly emphasized how grateful the patients should be for everything, even for discomforts because these supposedly contributed to their cure, and to even have a bed in a sanatorium when there were so many diseased people on waiting lists for one (e.g., pp. 121-122 and p. 127). However, recovering patients were given work tasks around the hospital once they had improved enough to be allowed “time up” (i.e., time up out of bed).

The hospital (at least its main building) was apparently built on a version of the 1809 Glasgow

Lunatic Asylum design, because it is described as having “feebly-lit mysterious corridors radiating out from a central point” (p. 50). As Dr. Wolf Wolfensberger explains in his one-day presentation on the history of human services (*EDITOR’S NOTE: see p. 45 of this issue*), the Glasgow Lunatic Asylum was a radial design, and became one of the most influential and most copied service designs. It was popular in good part because it enabled staff at a central location to look out over—to “surveille”—all the clients or inmates, thus reflecting the idea that service recipients had to be constantly watched.

Those patients who were expected to die very soon were put in the “light room”—this was the room where what was called Alpine Light treatments were given to those who had TB of the throat—with the result that being sent to the light room created a strong death expectancy in the patients (p. 134), even if they were actually being sent there for a dose of treatment.

The patients were never given any warning when they might be moved or taken for some treatment, and when someone came to their room to take them somewhere for something, they might not even then be told where they were being taken, or why (p. 148). This sort of thing was very common in the days of paternalistic and authoritarian human services.

The author says that the staff intentionally distanced themselves from the patients because they did not want to get attached to people who might die. Some staff were reportedly friendly, others were not just cold but outright hostile.

There was also an awful lot of physical discontinuity—moving patients about from ward to ward, room to room, even while they were still at the same level of care and so remained in the same building—and again, without any explanation of why this was being done.

How alienated from normal routines and rhythms the life in the sanatorium was is illustrated by the author’s report that while a patient, she no longer followed the normal progression

of times and seasons, but that the days were all exactly alike, and she differentiated them—even the holidays—only by whether that day was scheduled for a bath, a visit from people outside, an opportunity to put in an order from the store, etc. (p. 164). She calls this “divorce from normal living.”

Much like lepers, people with TB were reputed to be sex-crazy (as well as overly optimistic), so saltpeter was added to their daily coffee (saltpeter was believed to reduce the sex drive, though its main effect is that it makes people vomit). The one exception to this practice was made on Thanksgiving Day; and the sexes were totally segregated from each other.

The author describes a classic negatively-imagining service juxtaposition (p. 38) of the city tuberculosis clinic being located in the same site with the police station, city jail, emergency hospital and venereal disease clinic. As SRV explains, such a co-location of all these services means that the images associated with one (e.g., the image of vice with the VD clinic, the image of menace with the police station and jail) transfer to the others, thus giving them all a much worse overall image.

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**THE SOLOIST: A LOST DREAM, AN UNLIKELY FRIENDSHIP, AND THE REDEMPTIVE POWER OF MUSIC.** By STEVE LOPEZ. New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 289 pages, 2008. **REVIEW AVAILABLE ONLINE @ [www.srvip.org](http://www.srvip.org)**

**Reviewed by Raymond Lemay**

**Life Imitating Art & the Six Ages  
of a Homeless Musician**

*All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages.*<sup>1</sup>

WOLF WOLFENSBERGER IN HIS *Origin and nature of our institutional models* (1969) suggested that role perceptions could determine a person's place in the world, including legitimating the incarceration of individuals with disabilities into institutions. Very simply, the power of the stereotypes we share about certain broadly attributed roles shape and limit our responses to people in those roles. Roles are an essential component of the person that have long captured the imagination. Early on in his monograph, Wolfensberger quotes the “All the world's a stage . . .” passage from Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*; verily, there are real life situations full of the dramatic and tragic that capture the imagination and teach us essential lessons. In *The Soloist*—through the roles played by Nathaniel Anthony Ayers Jr. as well as the author Steve Lopez, and lesser parts played by the likes of the renowned cellist Yo Yo Ma and the psychiatrist Dr. Mark Ragins—we are presented with powerful scenes that tell us about devaluation, the power of valued social roles, and how friendship comes about through unlikely and fortuitous circumstances. The story is so compelling that Hollywood had to make a movie about it, which could have been subtitled: How valued social roles open up the good things in life. But as always, the book is simply better than the movie (and Nathaniel Anthony Ayers better looking than the actor who portrays him), so this synopsis and review will be about the book.

Steve Lopez is a well-known columnist with the *Los Angeles Times* and this book tells the story of his relationship with Nathaniel Anthony Ayers Jr. The title of the book, *The Soloist*, is very apt.

The first and most important thing to know about Nathaniel Anthony Ayers is that he is alone. He is homeless, a street person, an itinerant; he doesn't have much commerce with common folk generally and he doesn't have much interest in hanging around with other street people. For much of the book, Steve Lopez attempts to bring Nathaniel Ayers into organized services for homeless people, and Mr. Ayers is very much reluctant to go along because of his very low opinion of itinerants and of the professionals employed in such circumstances. Throughout the book, the author describes a number of events that reveal the extent to which the crazy Mr. Ayers is no fool.

***At first the infant,  
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms ...***

Nathaniel Anthony Ayers Jr. was born into a Black-American family on January 22, 1951. Ayers, with his sisters Jennifer Ayers-Moore and Del (who is mentioned but twice in the book), was born and raised in a black neighborhood in Cleveland, Ohio (US). His mother and father divorced when he was 11 and his mother remarried twice. He did not get along particularly well with his step-fathers or step-siblings.

***... And then the whining school-boy, with his  
satchel and shining morning face, creeping  
like snail, unwillingly to school ...***

Early on, Nathaniel showed an interest and some talent in music. He became very interested in the string bass and, with the assistance and mentorship of remarkable music teachers, he received a scholarship to go on to university. Later he was accepted at the Juilliard School in New York City.

Though Juilliard is one of the best music schools in the world, Lopez tells us that only one out of every 25 graduates actually makes it as a professional musician. Thus, as one can imagine, the competition at Juilliard is intense and every student is a high achiever. It would seem that this is one of

the factors that contributed to Mr. Ayer's eventual breakdown, that and the added pressure of being a highly rare black person in an overwhelmingly white middle- to upper-class high prestige institution. As one of Ayers' contemporaries mentions, Juilliard was not a particularly nurturing institution. Survival of the fittest was an appropriate description of its organizational culture. Mr. Ayers was not one of the fittest. This book will bring us to meet one of his school classmates, a certain Mr. Ma, an exemplar of what is meant by fittest. The pressure to fit in was a great challenge for Nathaniel Anthony Ayers. His school acquaintances and friends remember Nathaniel as being very much on his own, aloof and angry.

Though he had an incredible talent and produced a marvelous sound, his school reports that Nathaniel was not a diligent student. Sometime during his second year at Juilliard, he had a major breakdown; and during his third year was sent home to Cleveland where he was 'medicated' and given electroshock therapy. He eventually became a street person, surviving Cleveland winters and summers for over twenty years. When his mother died in 2000, he wandered across America to Los Angeles in search of his father. Those meetings were not very successful. Because of the better weather, Nathaniel decided to settle in Los Angeles where he had lived as a street person for over five years, when Steve Lopez happened upon him.

***... And then the lover,  
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad  
Made to his mistress' eyebrow ...***

When Mr. Lopez comes upon him in 2005, Mr. Ayers is the consummate player of what might be viewed as the improbable combination of two roles: homeless man and classical musician. He is a virtuoso itinerant and has mastered the intricacies of the homeless role. For 30 years he has survived on the streets of Cleveland—in the cold and snow of winter—and Los Angeles. He has refined the technique for keeping rats at bay with his two

faithful sticks. He husbands his many possessions in an elaborately organized shopping cart; he has discovered the places where he may safely wash, eat and sleep. He has an almost routinized existence, going from bridge to park to shelter according to his daily program of practicing his art and managing his bodily needs.

But it is his art and the vestiges of the valued role of artist/classical musician that seem to keep this homeless man focused and energized. He found in Pershing Park a statue of Beethoven and it is here that this great composer's music speaks to him.

It is an intriguing story of two and even three seemingly conflicting yet powerful roles. One need only consider the array of stereotypes and all manner of prejudice conjured up by the word 'homeless' and its related images. Lopez describes the 90,000 homeless people who scratch out meager existences from Los Angeles streets. Lopez, a resident of Los Angeles for many years, has crossed paths with these anonymous and dehumanized people, day in and day out, without much of a passing glance, though possibly an uplifted nose. It is not the role of the homeless person that leads Lopez to stop and take notice. Rather, it is the other incongruous role, a secondary though powerful one, one that makes him stop and take notice.

Curiosity makes Lopez stop and listen to a homeless man playing a much abused two-string violin. The sound coming from the violin is not altogether unpleasing. There might be a story here thinks Lopez, but what clinches it is a third even more improbable role: that of Juilliard alumnus. Here is a story that must be told, the former phenom who crashed; the tragedy of an outlier who was once at one end of the bell curve ending up at the other extreme. Here we have the interplay of three roles, three systems of stereotypes, all coming into conflict and all powerfully influential but at the end, with the help of Lopez, it is the valued roles of Juilliard alumnus and musician that will win the day, not only for Nathaniel Anthony Ayers but for many homeless people in Los Angeles. Indeed, because of Lopez, but more par-

ticularly because of how Mr. Ayers' story captures the imagination of the citizens of Los Angeles, the mayor and the federal government find some 600 million dollars to invest in lodging and services for the throng of homeless people of Los Angeles. It is far from being enough but better than nothing. Greater benefit comes from the juxtaposing of the roles of musician and Juilliard alumnus to the imagery that surrounds the homeless Nathaniel Anthony Ayers. Because of Lopez's reporting, this juxtaposition splashes some humanity and respect on the other homeless people who share his meager estate.

***...Then a soldier, Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard, Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel, Seeking the bubble reputation, Even in the cannon's mouth.***

It is the heroic Mr. Ayers that one glimpses through the newspaper columns and the book. It is the man who clings to the vestiges of his musician role that captures the imagination. This heroism is displayed in Mr. Ayers' refined eccentricities, for he is a man of character. Mr. Ayers is particularly well-mannered, a polite gentleman who insists on treating people with respect and addressing them formally. He was well brought up as a youth and he always refers to Steve Lopez as Mister Lopez (a formality that survives to this day) as he does to all other people he meets. Indeed, upon meeting Yo-Yo Ma, he instinctively calls him Mister Ma and even the great Yo-Yo is unable to get him to call him by his first name. The gentleman has a great sense of organization and routine. He is clean about his person; he has a certain aesthetic flair and maintains a distinguished posture. He is a gentleman in another important way as when he shows kindness to others who are down and out.

Another eccentricity is his intolerance of filth, particularly of cigarettes and butts strewn about pavement and property. One can imagine how his patience must be tested on the streets of Los Angeles, particularly in the neighborhoods he tends to

move about in. He has a particularly low opinion of smokers, drug addicts and drugs. Smokers and addicts are provocations and he often raises his voice and fist to express his displeasure about all of the 'thieves and bums' that surround him. He does not have a great wardrobe but tends to dress up, though sometimes his eccentricities seem to be carried too far, as when he wears a brassiere around his neck or on his cello. His speech often is stream of conscience, jumping from one subject to the next, at times incoherent and irrational. However, one striking thing is that when he speaks of music to musicians, his talk is rational and well-ordered.

But then eccentricity amongst artists is not completely unknown—one need only think of Salvador Dali for instance—but amongst musicians, craziness and eccentricity have sometimes accompanied greatness. Consider the self-engrossed Beethoven who walked with his hands behind his back humming to himself; the scatological Mozart; and the great Tchaikovsky who at times would conduct the orchestra with one hand, holding on to his head with the other for fear of losing it.

An important struggle played out in the book and around Mr. Ayers has Steve Lopez trying to choose between the approaches of the predominant bio-psychiatry, that in essence is mostly about forcibly hospitalizing and drugging people like Nathaniel Anthony Ayers (for their 'own good' of course), and an alternative approach that eschews coercion. But Mr. Ayers has no such struggle and is quite clear minded on the issue. He will have nothing to do with psychiatrists or hospitals. He has been electroshocked and been on psychotropic drugs before, and he will not do it again. He doesn't feel alive, doesn't hear his music, when he is on such 'medication.' Moreover, Nathaniel has learned to not trust psychiatrists and refuses to have any dealings with them.

The other psychiatric trend is exemplified by Dr. Mark Ragins, who suggests that respect and relationship are the only ways to address the problems of homeless people like Mr. Ayers. Ragins opines

that having a friend, like Mr. Lopez, will most likely be a significant factor in Mr. Ayers' possible recovery. Steve Lopez, however, is forever impatient; as we will discuss further, he simply wants to move on with his life, but as he feels responsible for Mr. Ayers, a solution must be found. Hospitalization and medication seem to fit the bill. He muses a number of times about forcibly confining Mr. Ayers, getting him on 'medication,' and giving him (whether he wants it or not) the treatment he needs. In the end, he doesn't do it, primarily because of his growing relationship with Nathaniel. The curious journalist and acquaintance, the observer so to speak, can easily contemplate the possibility of forcible confinement and drugging, but for the friend these become unconscionable.

In Steve Lopez's mind, it should be easy for Mr. Ayers to give up the street for a better life. By the time he makes his entrance in the soloist's life, the few roles Mr. Ayers has left have been much practiced and mastered and, as with his shopping cart of possessions, he has learned to safeguard them well. His identity can be summed up as that of homeless man-cum musician-former prodigy. It is this combination of roles, Mr. Ayers' identity, that has captured Mr. Lopez's attention—that have made Ayers interesting—but the columnist is initially unable to comprehend the importance and the courage, effort and persistence that have been deployed to maintain them for over 30 years. Even Nathaniel's family roles have been lost by his estrangement from his father and sisters. *The Soloist* shouts loud and clear that there are no quick fixes or miracle cures to be found or even needed. He is who he is, and why should he change?

The book covers a period of almost two years. Though Lopez has at least weekly encounters with Nathaniel Ayers, and sometimes many times more, Ayers will only very slowly move to a better place in life. For the first year, he remains homeless, refusing even to take up residence in a homeless shelter, despite the fact that Lopez uses trickery and coercion to get him to stay at the Lamp, a human service for homeless people in Los An-

geles. Having been entrusted with a number of musical instruments for Mr. Ayers, he organizes it so that Ayers can only retrieve his instruments by attending the Lamp where they are kept under lock and key. But Mr. Ayers is a wily musician, not easily duped, and makes away with what are in fact his instruments.

Lopez is finally able to convince Ayers to live in an apartment and then eventually shed his shopping cart. This whole part of the story is very instructive on how Ayers is almost obsessively tied to his very few material possessions which he carts around all over the place, as props to his very few roles. He won't give them up for the simple promise of something better. Stuart Robinson, an employee at the Lamp, gets to know Nathaniel Ayers fairly well. Lopez recounts his comment to the effect that "sometimes, he says, it's not that clients don't want to move inside. It's that they don't trust their own ability to hold on to a place of their own, or they fear that something or someone will force them out. The advantage of life on the street, Robinson says, is that you have nothing to lose" (pp. 178-179).

*The Soloist* teaches that there are no simple solutions to homelessness or even to the plight of a solitary homeless individual. What we learn is that it is very difficult to leave a well-integrated and sure identity, even if it is devaluing, for more positive roles that can only be more ephemeral, at least initially. And how it must all take time. After 30 years of homelessness, Mr. Ayers will take more than a year to take up residence in a new apartment and he will only do this because of his friend Mr. Lopez. There are no contrived miracles in this book except for those that bring people together.

***And then the justice,  
In fair round belly with good capon lin'd,  
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,  
Full of wise saws and modern instances;  
And so he plays his part.***

Over 30 years, millions of people have crossed paths with Nathaniel Anthony Ayers but here is

one Steve Lopez, celebrated journalist, who takes notice, finds an angle and writes a compelling story. The story, of course, should remind us of the power of luck and fortuity. Such meetings occur and such things happen, quite un-facilitated or un-mediated by a human service or professionals. How important it is to multiply opportunities for devalued people, if only to increase the likelihood of lightning striking and fortuity doing its thing. In reading this story, one has to be struck by the momentary contrast between two contemporary students of the Juilliard: Mr. Nathaniel Anthony Ayers Jr. and Mr. Yo Yo Ma. There but for the grace of God ... Devaluation seems to be, at least in part, an exclusion from good fortune; but for the 90,000 homeless people of Los Angeles, bad luck is simply not random. Much research shows the extent to which devalued people simply have fewer opportunities; they are isolated and idle. This is not only a waste of time and energy, but it seems such a waste of the potential bounties of lady luck. It would seem that the sun shines less and the rain falls more on the homeless.

Mr. Lopez came upon Mr. Ayers playing his battered two-string violin, and wrote a great story that captured the imagination of thousands of Los Angelinos. At the beginning, the relationship was exploitative; Mr. Lopez was using Mr. Ayers. Mr. Lopez conveys his guilt about this and his growing feeling of responsibility for Mr. Ayers. Having gained so much from Mr. Ayers, he could hardly leave him on his current life course. But he felt he needed to do something quickly so that he could get on with his life. One tends to want people to be true of heart and pure of intention, but Mr. Lopez goes a long way in his book in describing how in his case this was not how it all began. Mr. Lopez is quite clear, he was happy for the story, happy for the success, and he wanted Mr. Ayers to be helped very quickly (by someone else) so that he could get on with his life. Indeed, his early interest in biopsychiatry, medication and hospitalization was simply as a search for a quick fix. Over and over again in the book, one finds Mr. Lopez very impa-



tient with Mr. Ayers' lack of progress. However, at the same time, it's quite touching to see how Mr. Lopez spends sleepless evenings searching for Mr. Ayers, thinking that he had been the victim of this or that thug on a rampage against homeless people in Los Angeles. He goes so far as to try to sleep one night on the street to better understand. But eventually it is not the quick fix of 'medication' but rather the slow magic of relationship, another type of chemistry if you will, that will make the difference. It takes time but they do hit it off, though it is important to consider the sequence. It starts with Mr. Lopez feeling guilty, then responsible, then concerned and, finally, moving to esteem and friendship. All of this is Mr. Lopez's own *cheminement* (i.e., advancement). Later on in their relationship, Mr. Lopez will even instrumentally use his friendship for Mr. Ayers to convince him to move to his apartment, go to the Disney Concert Hall (home of the LA Philharmonic), and so on. He tells Mr. Ayers on a number of occasions that he and others have been to a lot of trouble to do this or that for him. "Do it for me ... for us!" And it works; for this is not therapy, it is life.

Again and again in this book we find out how social roles are the context of relationship, and how it is social roles and relationship that make the difference. There are important lessons here about the vestiges of almost forgotten roles, particularly valued ones that can sustain a person over the years, and then end up being the basis of the person's positive encounter with members of mainstream society, which in turn lead to a return and welcoming into valued society and recovery.

Lopez will not label this story with the (now over-worn) label 'recovery,' but rather writes of redemption (as in his subtitle: "the redemptive power of music"). Because of his music and Mr. Lopez's efforts, all sorts of new relations open up. Small things become big things. Small secondary roles become huge primary roles and then cascade into a multiplicity of roles, enriching and transforming identity and opening up many good things in life. Mr. Ayers becomes an acquaintance of Mr. Lopez's

social circle, including his family and his children. Moreover, Mr. Lopez makes an effort to establish contacts with professional musicians, both jazz and classical, in the city of Los Angeles. There are also some wonderful vignettes describing how the Los Angeles symphony orchestra and some of its elite members not only take an interest in Nathaniel Anthony Ayers but actually establish acquaintanceships with him, provide him with music lessons and opportunities to attend symphonies, and meet with some of the best performers. He becomes a regular at the Disney concert hall and even gets to meet again and discuss music with his fellow Juilliard alumnus, Yo-Yo Ma, a superstar performer. Members of the orchestra, aided and abetted by Lopez, make the reunion happen. There are happy scenes in this book of Mr. Ayers spending Easter with Mr. Lopez and his family. Mr. Ayers recovers some of his family roles when he is reunited with his sister, Jennifer, after many years of estrangement. Because of Mr. Lopez and because of the book, Mr. Ayers becomes a relatively rich man, who is not at all interested in money; thus the basis for a Foundation that carries his name.

But it is Steve Lopez, the participant observer and narrator, who is mostly transformed or redeemed over the course of the story. Both the film and the book make very clear that Lopez's interest in Nathaniel was, to begin with, purely instrumental, so to speak. He played this homeless musician with a two-string violin for the human interest story that would give him rich material for columns that he had to produce on a daily basis for his newspaper. Lopez's introspections begin as those of a self-engrossed narcissist, a modern hazard for writers, but they do tell the story of a man transformed. How can an upper middle class member of the intelligentsia relate and interact with riff-raff? Lopez turns out to be a true friend and he makes the most important part of the book revolve around Nathaniel Anthony Ayers: how he gets to know him and how he discovers the heroic dignity of the man.

The reference to redemption in the book's subtitle is quite surprising. It is possible that the author

is quite unwittingly evoking the early Christian practice of service that gave us the seven works of mercy and the teaching that giving shelter, clothing, food, drink, accompaniment or care to a stranger or a lowly person are redemptive, leading to the server's salvation. Salvation is to be found because, as the King of heaven said, "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

In the book, there are a number of digressions on the issue of friendship and Lopez's relationship with Mr. Ayers. These are actually quite well done and moving. Steve Lopez acknowledges that Nathaniel Ayers has had more impact on him than the other way around. It is clear than Nathaniel Anthony Ayers is quite self-involved and engrossed in his own inner life, which means that it's somewhat difficult for Lopez to reciprocate relationship. "Come to think of it, Nathaniel and I don't really have conversations. Mostly he talks or plays music and I listen. He can't relate to my world and I have trouble relating to his, except for my growing interest in classical music" (p. 211). Samuel Johnson, Boswell's biographer, aptly describes such an evolution of relationship: "We cannot tell the precise moment when friendship is formed. As in filling a vessel drop by drop, there is at last a drop which makes it run over; so in a series of kindnesses there is at last one which makes the heart run over." In reading the book, there is not an identifiable moment when this 'unlikely' friendship blossoms. It just grows and then it is there.

### ***The sixth age shifts***

***Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,  
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;  
His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide  
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,  
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in his sound.***

By the end of the book, things are a bit better for Nathaniel Anthony Ayers Jr. He lives in a small apartment in one of the dingiest parts of Los Angeles. Lopez has managed to get him another room

that he can use as a music studio. Ayers is named 'artist in residence' of the small community where his studio is housed. Because of his notoriety, he has accumulated a number of musical instruments, including violins, cellos, a string bass, a piano, a trumpet, all instruments that he can play.

However, Nathaniel Anthony Ayers won't soon be able to take up the role of professional musician. He still has a great difficulty in managing his thoughts and his behavior, and he can still get into trouble. Moreover, he is simply not that good a musician. The man has talent but he really hasn't played all that much in years. He especially lacks the precision and virtuosity that comes from focused practice and disciplined repetition.

Mr. Ayers has accumulated an impressive repertoire of eccentric habits of speech that are the natural props of his roles of homeless musician and artist. The author does us the favor of reproducing a number of soliloquies, speeches (or what some DSM<sup>2</sup> aficionados might term schizophrenic babblings) that call to mind the licks of jazz musicians. Licks are stock patterns or phrases of music, or groups of notes that are well-practiced and well-memorized, and that can be spontaneously interspersed in programmed music. Licks are at the basis of embellishments, ad-libs and solos. They are most likely at the heart of much improvisation in music, including classical improvisation.

It's striking that this concept of licks, which is well known in music, seems quite applicable to regular speech. Our own capacity to extemporaneously elaborate on this or that is undoubtedly tied to our memorized speech patterns, or speech licks if you will, that we easily reproduce as when we unthinkingly prattle on about this or that. These seem to have become caricatured in Mr. Ayers' discourses: when excited or stressed, he goes on rants about racial injustice and iniquities that are on the one hand quite outrageous and almost incoherent but, on the other, obviously well-rehearsed. Swearing and patterns of invective come to his lips, but we too employ and intersperse regular speech with well-rehearsed licks, such as those bundled in Mr.

Ayers' discourses. However, he is mellifluous when speaking of a musical opus or its composer; here again, other licks of the musician and music lover. Lopez reproduces his own well-rehearsed licks when he complains about the vagaries of newspaper publishing. And our own licks are undoubtedly tied to our well-rehearsed identity defining roles.

### Epilogue, Awaiting the Seventh Age

THERE IS HOPE throughout this book, but there is no therapeutic magic. As we reach the last page, Mr. Ayers is still quite crazy, schizophrenic if we must professionally label it, but his eccentricities are now camouflaged by a multiplicity of activities and social relationships that increasingly look like a full life, indeed a good life. Activities and relations fill up his days and reduce the time available for crazy behaviors and monologues. Mr. Ayers does not come out of this a new man, completely cured, recovered or having been transformed. If anybody is changed in this book, it is mostly Lopez, and possibly the reader. At the same time, this book is an eloquent testimony to the importance of socially integrated relationships—valued social roles (valued activities with valued people in valued places)—and how problems such as schizophrenia and other like problems are quite irresolvable collectively or with this method or that approach. Rather, what each homeless person requires, what each so-called “mentally ill” individual needs, is a few people who are valued, competent, constant and who maintain relationships over time, through thick and thin. It is only then that they might discover an important property of valued social roles: that they do tend to multiply as one moves through the ages of life. It is likely that this is what Mr. Ayers meant when he concluded an interview on the US television program *60 Minutes* by saying: “It is very good to be alive right now; it is very good to be able to be in the company of Mr. Lopez!”

#### ENDNOTES

1. From William Shakespeare's play *As You Like It* (Act 2, Scene 7). Lines spoken by the character Jacques.

2. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

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# LIST OF ITEMS TO BE REVIEWED

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ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE IN HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE. By V. NZIRA & P. WILLIAMS. London: Sage Publications, 223 pages, 2009.

VULNERABLE COMMUNION. By T. REYNOLDS. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 256 pages, 2008.

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