

**Art & Aging: Breaking the Chain of Isolation — a curated essay**  
**By Vanessa Daou**

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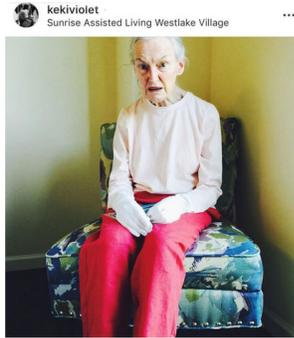
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*"There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you."*  
— Maya Angelou



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kekiviolet Today she is Mickey Mouse. What I wouldn't give to be able to have just one more conversation with my mother. But, she is lost in her own world #dementia

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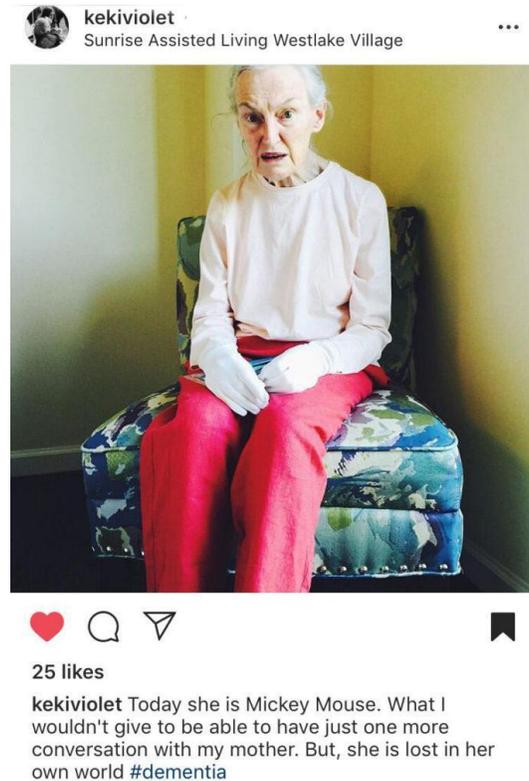
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For the young, healthy, purpose-driven, and mobile, it's easy to look off into the perceived distant future and dismiss what we cannot imagine: so called (*gasp!*) old-age. But, beyond the cultural, we have an ethical responsibility to look at the hard truths of our aging population, and ask ourselves not only what the numbers and statistics reveal, but what the reality of our aging population looks like — the hard questions. What does the world look like for an elderly person who suffers from a chronic, debilitating, incapacitating ailment, who experiences the world from one room, one chair, one bed? What are the mechanisms at play that create the conditions of isolation, which, in turn, lead to alienation, disconnection, and eventually, loneliness? And, further, what can we do to make the lives of our home-bound elders better?

*Screenshot from aRUDE magazine. I was a contributor from 2011 - 2019, when the magazine went offline.*

*“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.” — Maya Angelou*

For the young, healthy, purpose-driven, and mobile, it’s easy to look off into the perceived distant future and dismiss what we cannot imagine: so-called (*gasp!*) old age. But, beyond the cultural, we have an *\*ethical\** responsibility to look at the hard truths of our aging population, and ask ourselves not only what the numbers and statistics reveal, but what the reality of our aging population looks like — the hard questions.



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Statistics reveal, only three percent of senior citizens reside in nursing homes. That leaves millions of home-bound seniors living on their own, struggling to feed, bathe, clothe themselves, and nurse their own — often life-threatening — infirmities. Recently, the National Council on Aging found that 75 percent of seniors have two or more chronic health care concerns, many of whom are partially or completely immobilized by them. Conditions ranging from Age-related Macular Degeneration to COPD, render some seniors home-bound, chair-bound, and bed-bound. ([NCOA](#))



chiwan



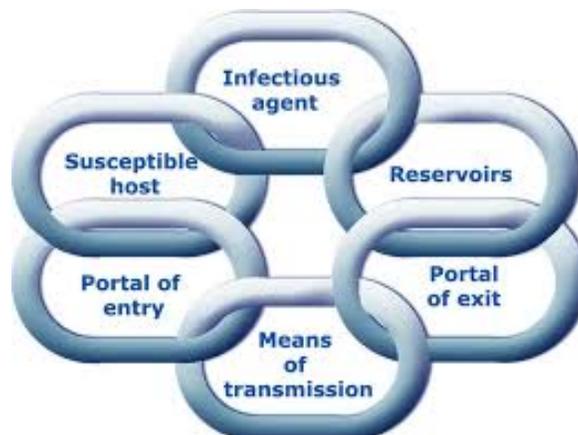
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chiwan #mom #hands #losangeles #life #vscocam

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*“Regarding health impacts, several recent studies have found that loneliness is a risk factor for decreased resistance to infection, cognitive decline and conditions such as depression and dementia.” [The Hill](#)*

While society considers isolation a *condition*, in many ways, isolation acts as a *\*contagion\**, echoing the pathways of the six-linked chain of infection. Like infection, isolation infiltrates an otherwise healthy organism, taking root invisibly. It might begin with one ailment or operation, hip replacement surgery, for instance, which results in a bed-bound elderly patient. Being bed-bound often results in bed sores: open wounds, reservoirs for any number of opportunistic pathogens.



A few treatments of antibiotics for infected bed sores leaves the urinary tract compromised, leading to Urinary Tract Infection. The antibiotics often cause severe drowsiness, a depletion of healthy stomach flora which leads to stomach upset, resulting in a lack of appetite, loss of energy, inertia, malaise, depression, and so on. Family, friends, and loved ones, while sympathetic, are uncomfortable, often, repulsed, around the sights and smells of the elderly — they stop calling and visiting. The chain of isolation begins.



**naroush82**



20 likes

**naroush82** "Can you bring me Baboog's bones?"  
Asked hyke. So honest and so sweet, since we have a thing for collecting bones. I wish my family was open to changes in traditions... would have wished to be able to visit all of Baboog's favorite places to spread his ashes... I look forward to the day I can celebrate a passing... with the people around me. Look forward to not being surprised by the transition of death every time it knocks on our door. How can we let go of holding on so tightly to this physical reality and rather trust in the divine timing of things and radiate inner peace at all times. Its all starting to feel like a dream... with no end and no beginning. Wish he could allow faith and love to soften his suffering... it's hard to hear him say this life isn't worth it. Yet he is holding on like a mothertiger!!!!

Used with permission by @naroush82

In many ways, isolation also operates in the same ways infection does: it infiltrates the host, takes over silently, insidiously. Whereas infection causes the destruction of the \*physical\* self, isolation causes the dissolution of the \*social\* self: family, friends, loved ones, eventually, become ghosts.

*When You Are Old*

*By William Butler Yeats*

*When you are old and grey and full of sleep,  
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,  
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look  
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;*

*How many loved your moments of glad grace,  
And loved your beauty with love false or true,  
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,  
And loved the sorrows of your changing face*

*And bending down beside the glowing bars,  
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled  
And paced upon the mountains overhead  
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.*

It's a human foible to retreat from elders who – for one reason or another – are physically, psychologically, or physiologically compromised. It's not, necessarily, a lack of compassion, but a lack of empathy, resulting from, among other things, the worship of youth-driven capitalism. We no longer admire, revere or seek guidance or solace from our elders: instead, let's admit, as a society, we recoil from them.



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shiveringgoat



16 likes

shiveringgoat Please enjoy this picture of someone's Grandad shooting pigeons off his roof with a giant water pistol.

SEPTEMBER 24, 2018

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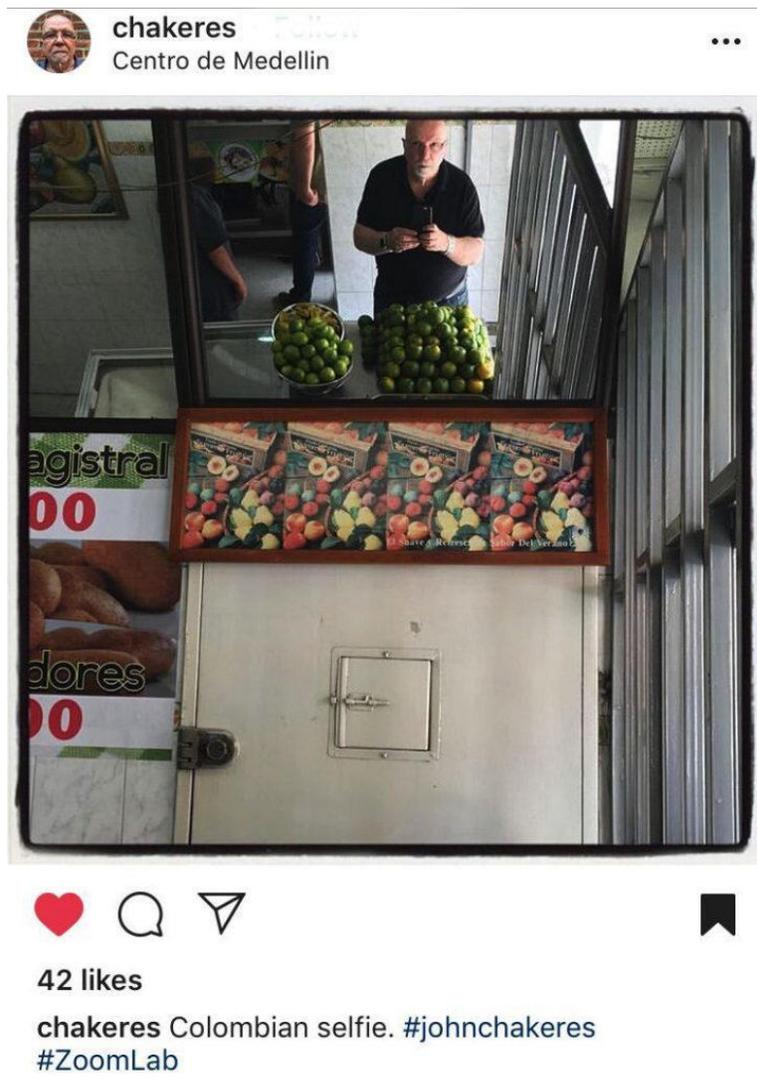
*“Research shows older adults who feel lonely are at greater risk of memory loss, strokes, heart disease and high blood pressure. The health threat of loneliness is similar to that of smoking 15 cigarettes a day, according to AARP. Researchers say that loneliness and isolation are linked to physical inactivity and poor sleep, as well as high blood pressure and poor immune functioning.” — [NPR](#)*

We now know, there's a direct correlation between loneliness – a byproduct and/or result of isolation – and disease. One of the main components in the lead-up to isolation is *purposelessness*. In the same way a flower cannot blossom without the sun, a human being, without purpose, withers. Without the spark of imagination, without the spark of beauty to light the daily facts of things, possibilities dwindle, as do feelings — of grace, elevation, harmony — and a human being loses hope. Beauty and hope walk hand in hand. [Van Gogh](#) knew this, [W.B. Yeats](#) knew this, [Frida Kahlo](#), [Langston Hughes](#), [John Coltrane](#), [Diane Arbus](#) — artists know, practice, and live by this.

*The Living Beauty*

W. B. Yeats, 1865 – 1939

*I'll say and maybe dream I have drawn content—  
Seeing that time has frozen up the blood,  
The wick of youth being burned and the oil spent—  
From beauty that is cast out of a mould  
In bronze, or that in dazzling marble appears,  
Appears, but when we have gone is gone again,  
Being more indifferent to our solitude  
Than 'twere an apparition. O heart, we are old,  
The living beauty is for younger men,  
We cannot pay its tribute of wild tears.*



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craig\_shifty



37 likes

**craig\_shifty** Why oh why must one encounter such things on the NYC subway? I mean...a FULL canary yellow suit, shirt and tie with matching bowler! All that was missing were the yellow gators. Do it and werk...I ain't mad at ya pimpin'. #steppinout #lookinsharp

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matthewtgrant



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violetwrites



11 likes

violetwrites #keepingwarm

DECEMBER 30, 2017

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*“The key element is that the classes teach a skill, rather than simply asking someone to construct a pre-made kit; they push for mastery instead of busywork.” — Artsy*



shiveringgoat



17 likes

shiveringgoat Miss you Dad x

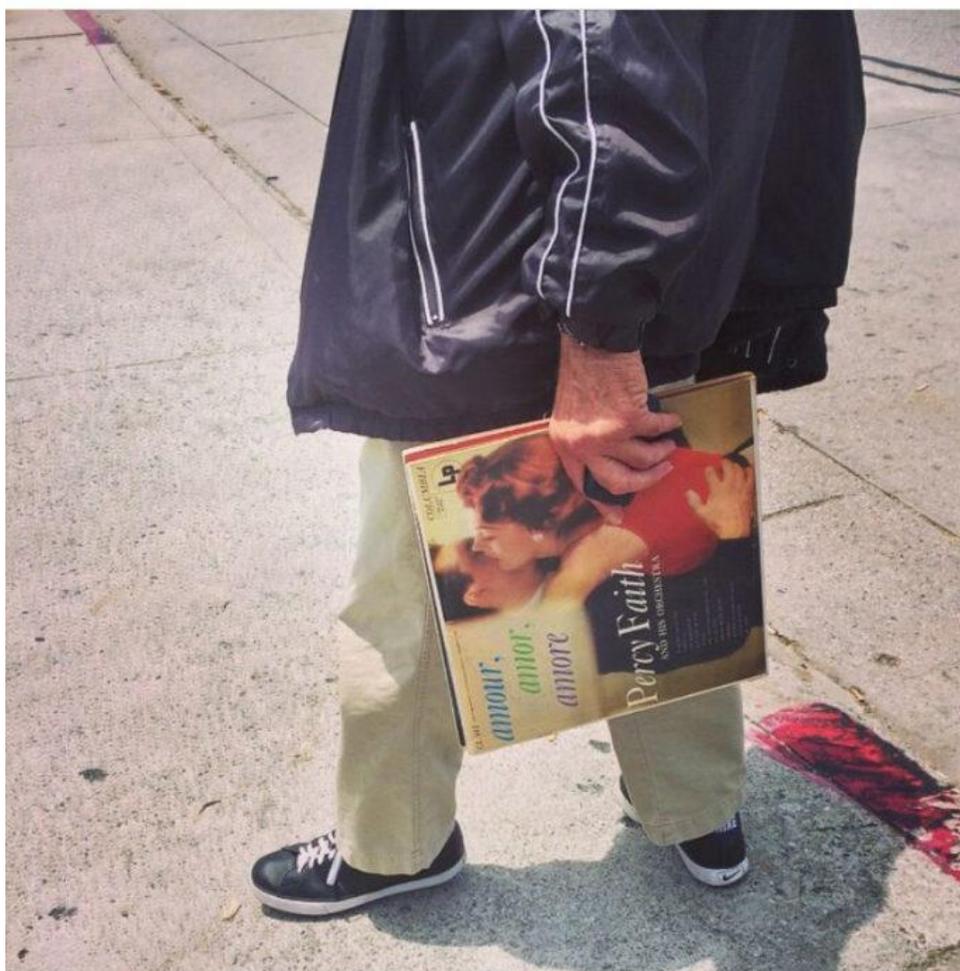
SEPTEMBER 28, 2018

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*“A training program in which patients walk while listening to regular beats can improve the velocity and cadence of Parkinson’s disease patients, while reducing their risk of falling, a study shows.” — [Parkinson’s News Today](#)*



vanessadaou



27 likes

vanessadaou #la #street #streetphotography  
#words #text #textual #amor #vinyl #love #music

MAY 17, 2015

*“When you put headphones on dementia patients and play familiar music, they come alive. Music is like an anchor, grounding the patient back in reality.” — [Medical News Today](#)*



shiveringgoat



8 likes

**shiveringgoat** My Auntie works in the Research and Development department at Ann Summers.

OCTOBER 27, 2018

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Despite the growing research demonstrating the healing effects of Art practices, therapies, and interventions – for the most part – Art in this country is still associated with recreation. Beyond therapy, the practice of Art *as* Medicine is making inroads in Museums and senior living facilities and community centers, in this country, as well as [abroad](#). Recent studies show how [living with purpose](#) and [purpose-driven Art programs](#) for Seniors led to fewer visits to the doctor, fewer medications, a decrease in loneliness and depression, higher morale, and more social activity (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).) Recent studies also show how [museums may have an analgesic effect](#), helping to lessen the sensation of pain.

So the next time you visit your elderly parent, aunt, or loved one, bring them a poster of Matisse's *Dance*, a video of *The Lion King*, a set of drums to play along with them, an iPod with a playlist of their favorite songs. Don't just pay your elder loved one a visit, pay them *respect*, pay them *attention* — pay it *forward*. Bring watercolors, a canvas, an easel, bring them a magnetic poetry kit and work together to find the words for their longing and loneliness, *work with* them to light the dreams still burning in their hearts, work with them to write the story of their lives they've always talked about writing. [Ease their loneliness, and help keep them healthy](#). Your future self will thank you.



**rdksf**  
Dogpatch, San Francisco



62 likes

rdksf Abuelita takes her coffee Wild! She loves seeing these mugs and gets a kick every time.

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Resources & Reading :

[Healthy Aging Facts](#), National Council on Aging

[Loneliness is an emerging public health threat](#), By Dr. Jonathan Fielding, opinion contributor, The Hill, 10/09/18

[Easing Old People's Loneliness Can Help Keep Them Healthy](#), By Anna Gorman, NPR, 1/1/17

[The Wellness Movement That's Proving It's Never Too Late to Become an Artist](#), By Abigail Cain, Artsy, 6/14/18

[Using the Arts to Promote Healthy Aging](#), By Jane E. Brody, New York Times, Well Blog, 3/7/16

[The arts as an antidote to loneliness](#), Letters Section, By Matt Wilson, Executive Director, MASSCreative, Boston Globe, Opinion Letters, 5/14/18

[Black Seniors Create Artworks Around Family Soul Food Recipes](#), The Skanner News, 5/30/18

[Aging: What's Art Got To Do With It?](#) By Barbara Bagan, PhD, ATR-BC, Today's Geriatric Medicine

[Art tours tied to easing of chronic pain](#), By Lisa Rapaport, Reuters, 8/17/18

[British Doctors May Soon Prescribe Art, Music, Dance, Singing Lessons](#), By Meilan Solly, 11/8/18

[Doctors can soon prescribe visits to Montreal Museum of Fine Arts](#), By Brendan Kelly, 11/11/18

[Langston Hughes](#), Gender and Sexuality Student Services, University of Illinois

[Distant beauty: How Van Gogh bent Japanese art to his own will](#), By William Cook, BBC, 3/20/18

[The Profound Vision of Diane Arbus: Flaws in Beauty. Beauty in Flaws](#), By Michael Kimmelman, New York Times, 3/11/05

[What I Learned About Beauty From Frida Kahlo](#), By Catherine Quinn O'Neill, Allure, 5/8/15

[Balanced Beauty: John Coltrane Quartet – "Ballads"](#), The Jazz Record, 2/27/17