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Sold a Bill of Goods

By

Edward F. Ansello, Ph.D.

My father used a phrase to describe when someone has been duped. He would say that the person was “sold a bill of goods.” I guess it had its origins in buying or accepting something without checking it. With regard to Boomers, elders, and all of us growing older, we have been sold a bill of goods here in America on a couple of things. The first is independence. We have internalized the myth of Americans as fiercely independent and autonomous. “Rugged individualism” is the supreme value. Lewis and Clark and other solitary adventurers explored the unknown America. Homesteaders braved the elements and much more to settle isolated sections of the country. And having the “big pond” separate us from Europe cultivated and set in place a go-it-alone mentality for ourselves and our nation. We came to buy into and to enshrine this mindset of individualism. So it comes as no surprise that we so frequently hear people who are clearly in need of help saying, “I don’t want to be a burden” or “I can get along just fine.”

The truth is that we have long since stopped being a nation of wilderness explorers and farmers and ranchers and recluses eking out a solitary subsistence or working in small pockets of communities to produce the food that others need. Now we as a nation live in population sprawls whose margins between city and suburb are blurred. We rely on others for services as they do on us. And when in our personal lives have we ever truly been independent or autonomous? Did we birth ourselves? Did we dress and school and socialize ourselves as children? Did we raise and launch our children without interactions with others? Can we get along solely by ourselves without using any resources from our employers, our family, or our community? Clearly, for the overwhelming majority of us the answer is “No.” We have needed others since before grade school to become and to be the persons we are. Why, then, do we assume that all of this is turned on its head when we develop an incapacity or when we become frail?

I have been proposing and writing about “assisted autonomy” for about 20 years, in part in response to the heavy toll taken by the artificial ideal of rugged independence. By assisted autonomy I mean assistance from others with the intention being to help make a person more interdependent and connected, because with these connections the person will more likely realize his or her goals. “Independence” is seldom achievable at any point in the life course, and may be even less so with age or impairments. This says nothing about whether or not achieving “independence” should even be a goal in the first place. Interdependence more truly describes one who is engaged with community and others. Interdependence more likely contributes to achieving one’s personal goals. Yet independence and autonomy are often blindly championed as goals for people with needs or impairments.

It seems that the mantra of autonomy or independence has sometimes had a hollow ring, justifying inaction by others and policies and practices of non-intervention and benign neglect. "Leave them alone. They want to be independent."

The 17th century English poet John Donne wrote that "No man is an island." Nor should he or she be. As my gerontologist friend Harry R. (Rick) Moody noted in his 1992 book *Ethics in an Aging Society*, too often autonomy-as-independence fails to consider the deeper human need for respect and social connections, for "dignity is far more bound up with the interpersonal and social fabric than with isolated acts of rational deliberation or consent" Moreover, in order for the exercise of choice by individuals with needs or disabilities to have any meaning, that is, for there to be true selection among options and true steps to activate the options that are selected, there must be some negotiation with and assistance from others. Therefore, assisted autonomy rather than independence is a means to empowerment and inclusion.

The second item in our bill of goods, that is, another thing about which we have been duped or misled is uniformity in later life. Researchers and educators would call it homogeneity. The popular wisdom is that somehow we become more and more alike as we grow older. Aging is pictured as like a big blob that absorbs us and makes us all the same, so that our characteristics, our needs, and our value become more similar with advancing time. So, certain programs are tied to chronological age and we are eligible for them whether they fit us or not and whether we need them or not. The message is "You've reached this threshold age, you must fit the mold." At the same time, many of us start making pronouncements as if older people are all alike. This sometimes becomes mythologized, as when people assume they can speak for all or most older citizens or when they purport to summarize who Boomers are or what Boomers want. You even hear older adults saying, "Well, older people don't like this" or "Seniors want that." Again, there's this one size fits all mentality when nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, as we grow older, we grow less and less like our age mates. Dissimilarity or heterogeneity increases. The defining element of growing older is how wonderfully difficult it is to encapsulate what it is and who we are. As mentioned, however, this does not stop those who wish to make pronouncements.

Research on various characteristics of older adults as they age shows greater "within-group variance," more spread in scores or observed measures, whether one is studying physical abilities, problem solving, organ functions, stamina, economic status, sexuality, responses to a medication or a number of other characteristics. For 20 years or so I have been calling this reality the process of individuation. More recently, Harvard researchers Lisa Berkman and Maria Glymour have been writing about "the centrality of variability" to describe aging. Comparing several age groups at a given point in time will show that there is more variance within the older groups than the younger groups, in almost anything being measured. This does not speak to whether the function or characteristic being measured is better or worse with older groups but to the range being found. The thrust of human development seems to be greater variability within a birth group as it grows older. It's as if Mother Nature didn't have a script for us once we had ensured the survival of the species. In other words, with increasing time we become more a birth

group of individuals. Why, then, should we agree to be treated or to treat ourselves or to treat our age-mates as a herd of similarities. The truth is, “When you’ve seen one older adult, you’ve seen one older adult.”