



(Video: Andrea Levy for The Washington Post)

Opinion | Do not mess with the very old

Listen, and you will hear from them the exquisite chime of life.



By [Anne Lamott](#)

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Many elderly friends have what I call the chime. It is a vibrating energy that certain artistic and spiritual people exude, as do people with a basic spirit of generosity. Almost silent, the chime rings like a tiny triangle off in the expanse. The chime is life and is in all of us, but it tends to be muffled until much of the clamor and hustle of existence quiets down. I hear it most often in the elderly, whose days are quieter, who gladly ruminate and gaze out windows a lot. They may appear frail, but there is strength in this fragility.

Do not mess with the very old and their gangs. I see them live with grace and (sometimes cranky) humor, along with infirmity, pain, wobbly brains and the scar tissue of decades enduring the blows and losses splattered through human life. They laugh gently at me when they hear me once again in do-or-die mode: They've seen over and over that most things will be okay as long as we're tender with each other. They are whom I want to be in 10 years, if I am alive and can remember this one thing.

Twelve years ago, seven older women and I formed a gang when we discovered in a recovery group that we had all tried and failed to rescue our grown kids from addiction. We had excellent ideas for our adult progeny! We just wanted to help, but help is the sunny side of control, and our kids often ran from us. Of course they came back because they needed us to babysit.

The Grans and I began meeting every week, busting each other when we meddled too egregiously. We let go, and — coincidentally — all of our kids ended up sober. Five years ago when I got married, I asked them to be my bridesmaids. They were in their 70s. (One of the flower girls was 80.)

In the years since, one has died and two have been widowed. They are dealing with cancer, AFib, macular degeneration and legions of mysterious pains. They laugh a lot, wake up stiff and deeply grateful for life, for this day.

A second collective in which I claim membership is a group of postcard writers. Every election cycle, you will find this gang of mine addressing postcards to inconsistent voters. I had a beloved friend of nearly 40 years, the Very Rev. Bill Rankin, who died two years ago at a frail 81. I spent a lot of time with him the summer he was dying. He was often writing these voter postcards when I'd arrive. We were part of the same syndicate, with a nice older woman in the Sonny Barger role, directing and exhorting us. (Ride free or die! Buy rolls of stamps for the fixed income people! Come get more when you're done!) "You're so good to keep doing this," I said.

"I want the world to know that, as Al Capone said, 'We mean business.'" He was emaciated and on portable oxygen, but his chime could (and still can) be heard.

One of my dearest old lady friends, Frances Stewart, got arrested a number of times in her late 70s with a bunch of other old men and women scaling (or trying to scale) the fences at nuclear power facilities.

She got fuzzier and fuzzier but was spared the terrors some people have with Alzheimer's. She was pretty dithery and yet so game. She chimed. My uncle took us sailing toward the end of her life on a windswept San Francisco Bay. I handed her a buttered Saltine for seasickness, and she popped it into her purse. When I pointed this out, she roared with laughter. The people who'd tried to scale the fences later formed a garden club with devious tendencies, helping to block some developers in our small coastal town and working to save our lagoon. She talked me into taking a CPR class with her aged female friends a few years before she died. It was very touching, although I was never sure any of them could have revived a being much bigger than a Yorkie. They were entranced, so glad to be of service.

One last gang. Ursula Le Guin said, "We are not great powers. But we are the light. Nobody can put us out." The oldest person I knew, a grande dame of theater from New Zealand named Ann Brebner, died a few years ago at 93. By 90, she was on her way out, with worsening AFib and mild dementia, but she loved being alive, here, on this side of things.

She was a beauty, with fine white hair she wore up and a beaky nose, a combination of delicate, refined and steely. Her salvation, her higher power, was art, music, books, movies, theater — her source of comfort that had showed her the way as a young girl, until the end.

When Brebner got sick with congestive heart failure, her mind started to go, and she came to believe that people were moving her rented cottage from place to place while she slept. It only sometimes made her sad and scared, other times just curious.

A posse of us old friends formed to support her. There were five of us, three in their late 80s. We spent a lot of time with her in her tiny garden, where she had mostly planted white impatiens to reflect the moonlight and milkweed to attract monarch butterflies.

Monarchs had been everywhere in her New Zealand childhood. One of her earliest memories was of being 4 years old and chasing a monarch in her yard, entranced by the tiger-colored stained-glass windows of its wings. When it

landed, she was able to pick it up for a fluttering moment. When it took off, there was butterfly powder on her fingers. By the end, she could not remember where her cottage was, but she could remember the light yellow butterfly powder on her hands.

The gang was able to keep her at home in her familiar if movable surroundings. We raised enough money to get her paid caregivers every night, till 8 in the morning, when one of us would show up. We took four-hour shifts. She mostly sat in her garden or on her couch, appearing to do nothing but listen to classical music. We gave her her favorite foods and did not try to force her to drink Ensure and eat unborn baby kale for strength. She just kept chiming away.

The last months of her life contained hardship, blessing, laughter, misery, grace and limbo, just like all life. Her strength and cognition ebbed and flowed. It felt as if she were being subsumed by the all-encompassing ocean, the all-holding waters. Here I am, it says, deep today; here I am now, medium, in organized waves; here I am now shallow and lacy, and coming in fast — better step back and wait while I roll in, until I roll all the way out again.



"The greatest gift that people can accept at any age is that we're on borrowed time, and they don't want to squander it on stupid stuff," Anne Lamott says. (Video: Shih-Wei Chou/The Washington Post)

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