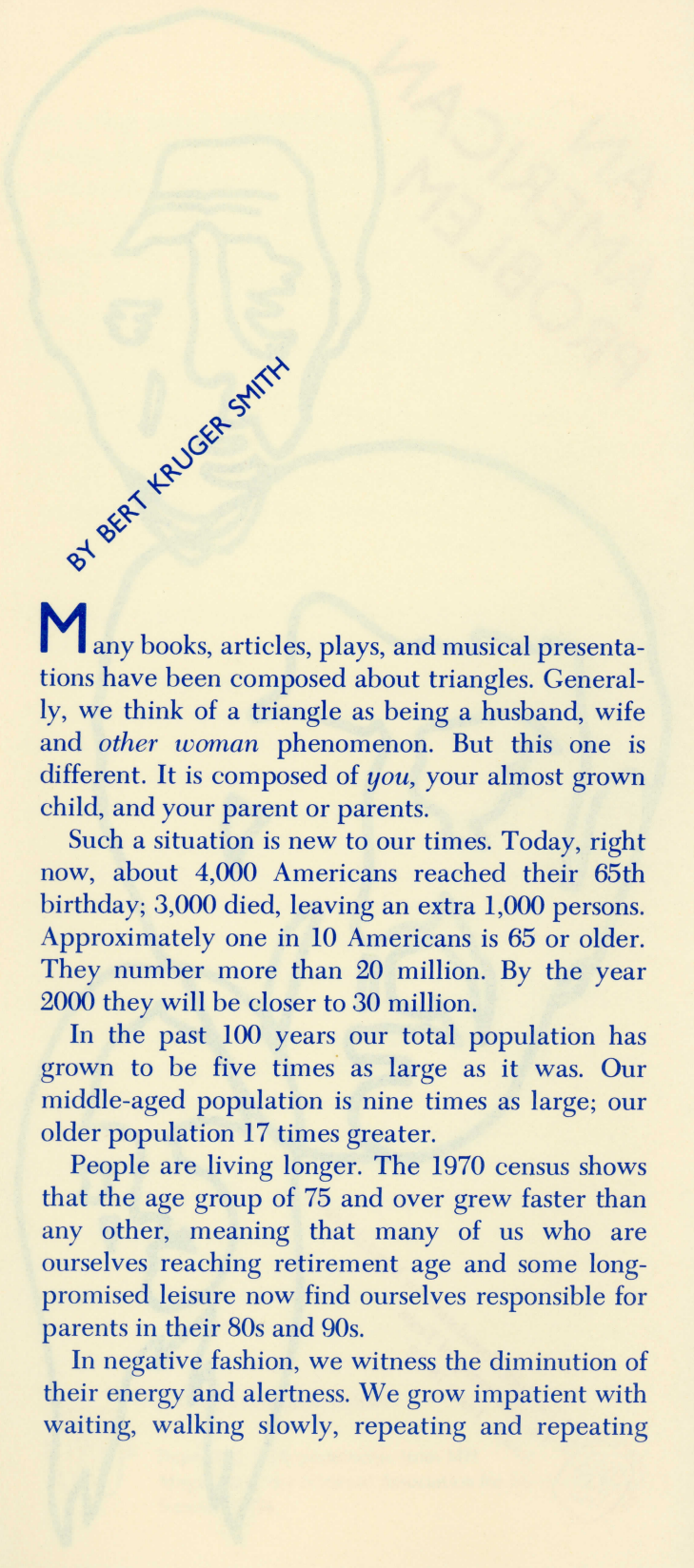


# AN AMERICAN PROBLEM



The University of Texas  
The Hogg Foundation for Mental Health  
The University of Texas  
Austin, Texas 78712



BY BERT KRUGER SMITH

**M**any books, articles, plays, and musical presentations have been composed about triangles. Generally, we think of a triangle as being a husband, wife and *other woman* phenomenon. But this one is different. It is composed of *you*, your almost grown child, and your parent or parents.

Such a situation is new to our times. Today, right now, about 4,000 Americans reached their 65th birthday; 3,000 died, leaving an extra 1,000 persons. Approximately one in 10 Americans is 65 or older. They number more than 20 million. By the year 2000 they will be closer to 30 million.

In the past 100 years our total population has grown to be five times as large as it was. Our middle-aged population is nine times as large; our older population 17 times greater.

People are living longer. The 1970 census shows that the age group of 75 and over grew faster than any other, meaning that many of us who are ourselves reaching retirement age and some long-promised leisure now find ourselves responsible for parents in their 80s and 90s.

In negative fashion, we witness the diminution of their energy and alertness. We grow impatient with waiting, walking slowly, repeating and repeating

again. *Why can't she remember that I was going to pick her up?* we lament. Or *Why didn't he write down the message?* Sometimes, the elderly seem far too dependent, much too demanding. They talk independence, but they ask us for help at all our busiest moments. That's one picture of our old. Yet, there is another.

Even as they show their need for us, they often demonstrate courage in meeting pain with stoicism and loneliness with dignity. They bear the imprint of the past and, with their memories, help to tamp our roots into the loosened soil of the present. They give us history and example and a love that reaches across the generations.

In addition to the parents who are living longer, we see young people staying dependent for increased periods of time. With the emphasis on higher education, they are financially dependent often well into their 20s or early 30s.

Again, negatively, we may see our young as nonconforming, rebellious, rejecting — particularly those who have chosen a life style contrary to our own. We wail *How could she do this to me?* or *Why can't he listen or mind as we used to do?* It's as if they were our very own possessions to continue in our mold for living. Sometimes today's youth seem far too unrealistic, much too independent. And even as they espouse independence, they call on us for financial help to get through school, to go to Europe, to buy a car. That's one picture of our young. But there is another.

If our older people are examples of history lived, our young are pictures of history to come—history which may be beyond our minds. The young—seen in a positive fashion—bring courage, strength, enthusiasm, and vision. They are the tomorrow to which our todays are aimed.

What does it mean, then, to be the person in the middle—planted firmly between the generations,

balancing them both on the long poles of your life-shoulders, the dependence tied up in bags of needs at the end of the poles?

Do you long to set down your dual burdens and disappear to some quiet island of self? Does it seem unfair, untenable, and undesirable to have to march tiredly through the years maintaining their weight? And should you feel guilt for having those negative emotions?

Let us look at some of the means of weight-balancing. Physical therapists know that the means of carrying a load is more important than the weight of the item itself. Emotionally, the same is true. Good mental health lies in the ability to cope with problems, to balance troubles, to maintain mountain peak views while climbing the slope.

*Carriers*, no matter what their age, need to continue to reinvest in other people, else their loved ones, friends and family will be erased by ones and twos from the blackboard of their lives. *Replacement therapy* might be the name given for this new commitment to others. If such therapy is practiced early and continually, the carrier will not himself grow old like some very old persons who have shrunk into a single room with their whole life bound by faded pictures on faded wallpaper and only one small window to let the day come in.

There needs to be a constant reaching out—upward and inward. The investment has to be in self-growth, in new *others*, in activities with meaning. Reaching out to others—strangers or persons who need friendship, concern, and the pleasure of conversation—is one of the best ways of putting aside personal feelings of hurt, dislike, resentment, and guilt. With a stranger, one starts clean—no buried angers, no unsettled fights, no ugly rivalries. Instead, there is the open and honest reaching of person to person in friendliness and warmth. This ability to share with a contemporary some of the fears and delights of a particular age is therapeutic.

What are some actions which you, the carrier, might take? First of all, you must see yourself—honestly, wholly, and without excuses. If the traits we have today—the interests, concerns, and activities—were enlarged and exaggerated, what kind of persons would we be? Compassionate? Intent? Loving? Or selfish, uninvolved, rejecting? *For we are what we were only more so and we are what we will be only less so.* Selfish tyrants do not generally turn into sweet old people. Possessive parents do not change into unselfish grandparents. Dependent persons do not become reliable because of added years.

Second, you need strength in order to carry both generations safely. But you should not feel guilty because of their weight, or because of fatigue or understandable impatience. Instead, you should find ways to set down your double load from time to time, to drink alone from life's waters, to sun in the rays of others.

Also, you should learn to find escape passages, to be able to shift the load to others at times. No generation has full call on any other. In the Viktor Frankl sense, we are charged with finding meaning, meaning for our own lives.

Third, you should find ways to make each generation learn to help the other—to reach out across the span of years. They should be encouraged to take responsibilities for themselves—to feel the needs of the carriers and respond to silent requests, to assuage guilt and understand fatigue. Conversely, you must remain whole, concerned and alert, even while carrying both the young and the old on your shoulders.

Each person, then, is responsible for his own life. It is that responsibility that sometimes seems like the burden—but a burden that can be lifted high off one's shoulders by understanding, self-awareness, and action on the part of all three generations.



A Hogg Foundation reprint

Reprinted, with permission, from MH  
Magazine of the National Association for Mental Health  
Summer 1974