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## OK for Boomers: How Do We Remember Those Who are Locked Down as We Open Up?

Donald Roth

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## OK for Boomers: How Do We Remember Those Who are Locked Down as We Open Up?

### Abstract

"So many of us are desperate for a return to normal, to the familiar, that I worry about one group that we all agree things will not be normal for: those who are at elevated risk, especially those 65 or older."

Posting about addressing social isolation in older citizens during the pandemic from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/ok-for-boomers-how-do-we-remember-those-who-are-locked-down-as-we-open-up/>

### Keywords

In All Things, coronaviruses, baby boom generation, loneliness

### Disciplines

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### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

# in things

June 9, 2020

## **OK for Boomers: How Do We Remember Those Who are Locked Down as We Open Up?**

**Donald Roth**

So much is novel right now. In facing a novel coronavirus, we've chosen a novel societal response that raises novel questions about economics, policymaking, the reach of law, religion, and so much more. With so much novelty, there is a wave of uncertainty that carries with it deeply fraught divisions over what we should do next. So many of us are desperate for a return to normal, to the familiar, that I worry about one group that we all agree things will not be normal for: those who are at elevated risk, especially those 65 or older. No matter what the coming months look like, it is essential that we think about what we can do to offer connection and hope to those of us for whom any semblance of normal is well over the horizon.

### **What is the danger?**

I don't argue that America is a youth-oriented society. From the trope of the old man threatening young punks to get off his yard to the lexical explosion of the phrase "OK Boomer," our society is increasingly dismissive of the wisdom and societal input of our senior citizens.

For those on the progressive end of society, it's a point of political hope that the youth tend to be more progressive than the older generations. It's also a cornerstone of the current Democratic platform that diversity is the future and that racial minorities deserve political priority. Of all age groups, no demographic is more overwhelmingly white than those 65 and older. This isn't saying that progressives don't care about the elderly, but it is a significant incentive to suggest that this group won't be a priority.

However, there are concerning incentives out there for conservative folks, too. To be conservative is to hold some preference for normal. It also includes a suspicion of government interference with people's everyday lives. It means desiring minimal personal restrictions, and, for conservatives below the age of 65, this creates a natural pressure to write off total isolation of the elderly as the price easily paid to just to be able to do what people want, when they want.

Across all spectrums, American society treasures a concept of liberty that easily moves from individual liberty to individualism. This was something that Alexis de Tocqueville noted already back in 1840 in the second volume of his famous *Democracy in America*. It has, if anything, become a more prominent feature of American culture in the years since. Individual freedom and welfare are important, but when our perception of our own enjoyment of such things becomes our primary metric for evaluating the state of society, it becomes all too easy to advocate for an essentially narcissistic public policy.

### **What is the cost?**

All of these factors can foster a narrative that obscures the need for concern. I frequently hear versions of this argument: "Why should your fears keep me locked in my house? Let us get back to normal, and if you're afraid/old/etc., you can always stay home." This creates a false picture of the future. Yes, people at low risk will need to return to some sense of normalcy, but this greater circulation of activity will mean that those who are at risk need to take even more significant protective steps. Yes, people can keep isolating at home, but those who need to isolate will need to be even more isolated, and the timetable on that isolation (likely driven by development of a vaccine) is both much longer and much more uncertain. This is something easily lost when explaining our public and personal pursuit of normalcy.

Loneliness and social isolation are serious problems that correlate heavily with increased mortality. In fact, social isolation may be the more important concern of those two. We were already facing a "loneliness epidemic" among the elderly population in America going into the Covid crisis; a period of prolonged and stringent isolation is likely to seriously worsen the issue. In other words, while there are strong incentives for the general population to focus on getting back to normal, telling ourselves the stories needed to motivate our collective action may lead us to disregard or even worsen the lot of those who cannot follow this course.

It hardly needs saying, but these pressures do not conform with the picture of who we are that we find in Scripture. While God saves us individually, He calls us as His people, and we are identified as one body. We are exhorted time and time again in Scripture to respect the wisdom of our elders and to show special care for their welfare. Especially

within the church, we are all one family, and Paul considers neglect of our family to be a denial of our faith. Our reasons for concern are real, the potential cost is significant, and our Christian obligation to respond is undeniable.

### **What can we do about it?**

It might be worth pausing briefly to again make sure that my words not be read into the stay-at-home/open up debate. Both sides of what is turning into a tragic policy polarization agree that the elderly should continue to be isolated, and both sides recognize that opening up to some degree is both inevitable and that it will happen in different ways for different demographics. If you feel that I've been building toward one narrative or the other, this is my plea that you discard that notion. What I'm arguing for instead is a narrative theme that we should integrate into our path forward, however we conceive of it.

The narrative theme is this: throughout the lockdown, we have lionized the sacrifices born by healthcare and essential service workers to provide for the general welfare. As we open up, we should put a similar emphasis on the sacrifices and struggles of those who remain isolated from society. That is, several politicians over 65 have stated that they would lay down their lives in order for the economy to move back to normal. We need to recognize that, in terms of life expectancy, this is what is happening. If this is our mental model, it will go a long way toward making sure that we, as a society, don't take this ongoing cost lightly, and it will hopefully motivate us to mitigate that cost as much as we can.

So how do we mitigate these costs? There are a number of solutions that I've seen offered out there, and I won't pretend to be originating a new list. Among the ideas that most interest me are those that go beyond *checking in* to *journeying with*. Of course, we want to make regular calls. Expanding things like grocery delivery services also make great sense, but they aren't enough. Having people wait on our needs is not the same as having them travel alongside of us. I think ideas like **book clubs, watching movies together**, care packages, and making pen pals move more in the right direction. And there's room for more innovation: What if instead of just delivering meals, you set up a phone or video call and coordinated mealtime, welcoming someone to your virtual dinner table? As churches move to reopen, how might we make use of the evidence we have that **outdoor transmission is much rarer** to provide for opportunities for worshipping together in that environment? Many of our kids participated in wonderful card-writing drives at school; could we leverage that to have our churches' young people do the same for the elderly in our own congregations?

There are so many more ideas out there, and I'm not asserting that any particular person just can't wait to forget the elderly person in their lives, but I think there are good reasons to be concerned that we might be insufficiently attentive to this issue. If we frame this not as a favor we're doing to those at risk as much as a burden that they bear as we all try to get back to normal, I think we are less likely to fall into that trap.