



Readers Guide for “Old Age in a New Age: The Promise of Transformative Nursing Homes”

a book by Beth Baker, published by Vanderbilt University Press, 2007

1. According to the author, “No social workers, health professionals, or advocates — let alone older people themselves — sat around and dreamed up what would be the most humane living arrangement for older people who have diminished physical or mental capacities and no one to help them out at home” (p. 10). If elders and families had been involved in planning nursing homes from the beginning, how do you think they might have been different?
2. In 1987, the Nursing Home Reform Law (known as OBRA 87) was passed, including comprehensive Resident’s Rights (p. 15, 211-13). Were you familiar with these rights? In your experience with nursing homes, are these rights honored?
3. Organizational consultant Lavrene Norton of ActionPact suggested that groups wanting to transform long-term care take part in a simple exercise. Participants each wrote down things that are most precious to them about their own homes (p. 32). What are three things you would identify in your home? Would they be available to you if you moved to a nursing home or assisted living?
4. In his book on stress, *Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers*, researcher Robert Sapolsky says that few environments are as psychologically stressful as nursing homes (p. 48). What did he mean by that? Have you seen examples in your own experience that illustrate what Sapolsky was talking about?

5. A common perception regarding nursing home staff is that “you can’t teach people to care” — meaning some employees are naturally kind and others are not. But this book argues that compassion is often a systemic or organizational issue, rather than an individual character flaw. Do you agree? What can be done to bring out the best in the workforce? How could families contribute to this?
6. How important do you think the physical environment is to people’s sense of well-being? If nursing homes can’t afford to completely renovate, what smaller steps do you think they could take to create a feeling of home? If you were to move to a nursing home, would you prefer a large place like The Mount, with things like day care centers and cafes inside, or a small house like the GreenHouse?
7. Nursing home residents rank relationships as the issue they care most about. In your experience, do nursing homes and assisted living pay enough attention to relationships? If you are a family member, how are your relationships with people who work or live in the nursing home? Are there practices in the book that you think could be widely adopted to better build a sense of community?
8. Did it surprise you that some nursing home residents were able to go dancing at a bar, attend Little League games, volunteer with a food bank, or take up painting? Did this challenge any of your assumptions?
9. Roughly half the people in long-term care have some form of dementia. Many people assume that those with dementia are unable to appreciate a high quality of life. The author argues that homey surroundings and caring relationships make a big difference to all residents, including those with dementia. What are your thoughts?
10. In Chapter 11, the author shares two ways that nursing homes handle death. Do either of these examples reflect your own experience?
11. What do you think are the greatest obstacles to our society implementing the kind of transformation described in this book?
12. What do you think consumers can do to play a role?
13. Are you willing to take a step personally? If so, what would it be?