

“Old Age” Has a Bad Reputation

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It was somewhere back in high school when I decided that I wanted to die while I was still in my prime. The idea of living into my sixties—or God forbid, seventies—was frightening. In the flush of youth, old people seemed decrepit to me. I didn’t want to become like “them.”

Yes, old age suffers from a bad reputation in America. For example, when the American spiritual teacher Ram Dass encountered a friend from India whom he had not seen in many years, his friend said, “Ram Dass, you are looking so old—so gray!” Ram Dass was horrified to be labeled as “old” but then he recognized that in India being old is an achievement—a sign that you were strong—a survivor! Thus, his friend was, in effect, saying, “What a great achievement, Ram Dass! You have arrived at old age!”

In the U.S., this “achievement” is becoming less and less remarkable. Before the modern era only about one person in ten lived to be sixty five; nowadays 80% of Americans live past 65! Given that the length of our lives is changing, perhaps now is a good time to consider changing some of our beliefs about aging.

We Americans have been culturally conditioned to believe that adults beyond sixty-five are, for the most part, unproductive, frail, and mentally diminished. Beliefs like these have a way of becoming self-fulfilling prophesies—e.g., If you associate the post-retirement years with diminishment, uselessness, and frailty, you will, very likely, enact those years in just this way.

In their book, From Aging to Sage-ing, Schachter-Shalomi and Miller, point out: “Aging, itself, isn’t the problem. It’s the images that we hold about it, our cultural expectations, that cause our problems. To have a more positive old age, we must change our aging paradigm...”

Rather than lapsing into a “second childhood”—i.e., using the leisure that comes with retirement to pursue all manner of “trivial pursuits”—these authors point to the possibility of growing into a second, deeper and more profound, maturity as we age.

Let’s face it: When we are in our middle years, pursuing a career and often caring for a family, we have little time for reflection, much less contemplation. Often it feels like we are out of control—like our lives our living us rather than the other way around. By contrast in elderhood, we, at last, have the time to cultivate our inner life—the time to harvest the wisdom of our years.

So, rather than seeing old age as a time of waning vigor, lowered self esteem and social uselessness, we could view it as a time of spiritual vigor, self discovery and service on behalf of the common good. Indeed, we can, if we choose, enter the retirement years the way one embarks on a much-awaited adventure. Now, at last, we will have the time to look back over the dramas and plot lines of our life and make meaning of our life “play,” as well as time to heal relationships, and to come to terms with our own mortality. In this vein, Abraham Heschel in his book, The Insecurity of Freedom, writes: “The years of old age may enable us to attain the high values we failed to sense, the insights we have missed, the wisdom we ignored. They are, indeed, formative years, rich in possibilities to unlearn the follies of a lifetime, to see through inbred self-deceptions, to deepen understanding and compassion, to widen the horizon of honesty, to refine the sense of fairness.”

At a time when our culture is pocked with shallowness and hypocrisy, this concept of elders as contemplatives and wisdom keepers, who play an essential role in maintaining the health of our social and ecological fabric, brings renewed dignity and meaning to the aging process.