



Engaging Aging

Reframing and Honoring our Aging

Sister Imelda Maurer, CDP

*"The best is yet
to be, /
the last of life,
for which the first
was made: /
Our times are in
his hand /
who saith,
'A whole I
planned, /
youth shows
but half;
Trust God:
See all,
nor be afraid!"*

R. Browning

Every human being in the world greeted this morning one day older. How we, in our Western culture, typically respond to that reality is described well by Dr. Louise Aronson, geriatrician and author of *Elderhood*: "Our culture has given us messages from early childhood that aging, even though we are all doing it all our lives, is bad, that old is ugly and that (personal) evolution over a lifetime is evidence of failure." That last phrase about our personal evolution seen and experienced as evidence of failure might well stop us in our tracks. Perhaps, this new awareness can call us to reflect on the implications of these societal messages in our own lives.

What is unique about the harm of ageism is that it has been normalized in our society. Judgments based on chronological age, both young and old, are so deeply a part of how we think and feel that we are not aware of them. Because we are unaware of our implicit biases, there is a greater difficulty in recognizing stereotypical attitudes which can lead to actions of ageist discrimination.

Sister Imelda Maurer, CDP, is a Sister of Divine Providence in San Antonio, TX. A life-long learner, community organizer, advocate, and writer, her ministries have included secondary education and community organizing with farm workers and textile workers in the south. Later, influenced by seeing her aging mother's experience in care facilities, she began working as a long-term care ombudsperson and a healthcare administrator for several years. Now, Sr. Imelda ministers as the founder and director of "In Service to Our Own," a resource for religious in the area of aging. She seeks to give prophetic witness through writing, consultation and presentations. Sister holds a MA degree in applied gerontology from the University of North Texas.



Reframing and Honoring Our Aging, continued



Personal and shared study and reflection are opportunities to educate ourselves about societal influences in our lives. From left, Sr. Rosalie Wisniewski, OSF, at Tau Center, St. Louis, MO; Sr. LeeAnn Mackeprang, RGS, and Sr. Patricia Marie Thomas, RGS, at Mason Pointe Community, Town and Country, MO, witness to the value of learning.

This article addresses the following:

- Unexamined beliefs about aging and the effects these messages have on our lives and well-being
- Various types of ageism to which all are subject, and practices illustrating this discrimination
- A holistic reframing of aging using the expanding knowledge base of gerontological research
- A call to action

Internalized Ageism

Our culture has given us messages since early childhood that growing older is something to be feared and avoided. As we become more educated about the experience of aging, we are learning that everyone has some measure of biased thinking; we have internalized the messages bombarding us since early childhood. These messages continue today in media venues and the allure of eternal youth put forth by the cosmetics industry. In *Ageism Unmasked*,

Tracey Gendron writes, “Even the most well-intentioned efforts to educate people about aging are often misleading and damaging.” Ageist concepts can even taint our approaches to spirituality.

Our task is to become more aware of the unexamined ageist beliefs we have internalized and to unlearn them, but this is not easy. Having held these beliefs for so many years, it will take time to recognize the ubiquitous instances of ageism in the structures and practices of daily life. It is only when we recognize ageism that we can address and resist this social ill.

Ageism in Action

Let us look at a few examples of what we might experience or observe every day.

- Two friends meet after a long absence. One is welcomed with the expression, “You haven’t changed a bit!” or “You haven’t aged a day!” Clearly, the hidden implication is that aging is bad. Old is bad.

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- We might lament with a mutual friend about someone we have just seen after a long absence: “Oh, she has aged so much.” The physical changes are seen as undesirable and to be avoided.
- Upon learning our age, someone may remark, “Well, you certainly don’t look your age.” It is meant as a compliment, and if we take it as such, it says we have internalized the ageist myth that growing older is negative.
- We make jokes about our age or age-related conditions: “Thank God, wrinkles don’t hurt.” Although the humor may seem harmless and innocent, self-deprecating humor about ag-

ing is always based on an alleged deficit or imperfection. Inasmuch as it belittles or undervalues, looking at aging as deficit-based is not helpful to how we accept, honor and cherish our aging.

Good News About Aging

The negative myths we have heard about aging since early childhood, and which we have subconsciously internalized, are not true. This is not just an opinion. It is grounded in research-based data. Dr. Gene Cohen writes in *The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain*, that one reason for aging negativity is the fact that until the recent past, research dealing with older adults was always deficit-based. As a re-

Jigsaw puzzles are a favorite staple in community rooms. Research demonstrates that these puzzles not only relax us, they also improve cognition and visual-spatial reasoning. Puzzlers will experience improved concentration, memory, and problem solving skills. From left, Sisters of the Good Shepherd, Sr. Anita Kristofco, Sr. M. Monica Duong and Sr. Nora Pat O’Flannigan enjoy some time together at the Mason Pointe Lutheran Senior Services Community in Town and Country, MO.



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sult, aging was viewed and dealt with as a problem. This fact was brought home to me years ago when I attended a sale held by a local university weeding its library collection. Among the books discarded by the School of Nursing was one entitled *The Problem of Aging*. Such was the historic context in which young nursing students had been learning about their senior patients!

To begin to see aging in its rightful light, we must consider that it is not a process that starts when one notices gray hair or when it takes a little more focus to catch every word of a conversation. Aging is a multifaceted phenomenon that starts at conception and continues throughout our life. Senescence is the physical pathway of every living organism: growth, maturation, decline, death. But that is the pathway of the earthen vessel, not the treasure.

We are so much more than merely our physical bodies. Consider Paul's words in 2 Cor:4, "We hold this treasure in earthen vessels ... Therefore, we are not discouraged; rather, although our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day."

What Paul wrote in his time is expressed today in life-span development theory which states that there is potential for growth and development at every phase of life. We all know this at some interior level. We know we are still the same person even though our stamina lessens and we shift expectations of productivity. We know that our longevity has deepened our ability to show compassion, to experience relationships in a way far deeper than we were able to do at an earlier age. Finally, wisdom is a trait that is commonly seen as age-related. It is becoming more common in religious institutes to refer with reverence and respect to our

"wisdom figures." But this term can become all too facile in its practical application in the presence of unrecognized ageism.

When we carry and believe our internal messages that describe later life as being circumscribed by loss and decline, we are generally looking only at physical changes and attributing them to

As the number of people volunteering in this country is declining, participation in service projects becomes an important way for seniors to contribute to the local community. Whether onsite engagement or support through prayer and advocacy, connection with others benefits the people being served as well as the participants, reducing feelings of isolation and improving emotional wellbeing. Br. Tom Carroll, OFM, left, is seen at St. Anthony's Food Pantry, St. Louis, MO.



Reframing and Honoring Our Aging, continued

Trinitarian Fr. James Day, OSST, was recently featured in the Retirement Fund for Religious appeal. He offered his suggestion for a long and happy life. “We must try to live our lives as an expression of helping others discover Jesus and the joy that comes back to us. The more connected we are to people, the more patient we become, the more we listen, the happier we are to do what we are doing. The joy and laughter that I witnessed as a young boy attracted me to the life I chose.” Fr. Day serves as President of DeMatha Catholic High School in Hyattsville, MD.

changes in our total personhood: body and spirit; earthen vessel and treasure. This is a gross mistake. We all experience physical decline. This decline is unique to each of us, such that “when you see one person 80 years of age, you have seen one person 80 years of age.” Regardless of the rate of physical decline, it does not completely define our total personhood.

I am reminded of a story told to me about a sister experiencing advancing dementia. Others spoke with sadness about her growing inability to express herself and the loss this represented as she had been a woman with marvelous intellectual gifts who served people so well. Only one sister, herself in cognitive decline, challenged the others saying, “How do we know what that person is experiencing? She may be experiencing a deeper, more intimate union with God than any of us have or can imagine.”

Ageism and Spirituality

Perhaps the most universally accepted view of aging seen through the unexamined eyes of ageism is that later life is circumscribed by loss and diminishment. This needs to be soundly rejected.



A common theme around aging and spirituality in materials prepared for religious is that the task of later life, the call of spirituality in our later years, is one of letting go. It is premised on the false belief that our later years are circumscribed by loss and decline. Yes, we experience physical decline that becomes more observable in our later years. But we experience losses throughout our lives. Loss is not unique to our later years.

The first loss in life was being pushed out of the warm, intimate space of our mother’s womb where we heard her voice and sensed her heartbeat. But because of that loss, we were able to develop a deeper, life-long relationship with our mother. With the change in birth, there was loss and gain. So it is with change in every dimension of our lives.

Popular writing about aging and spirituality sometimes seems to focus on the losses of aging. This calls for reframing in accordance with

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what we are learning about the aging process. How many times have we heard someone use the analogy of the four seasons to explain the human life cycle? Spring and summer are portrayed as times of growth and life, paralleling our youth. Then fall and winter appear characterized by the loss of leaves, bare trees, and stark, frozen landscapes, paralleling our senior years. Imagine, instead, if fall becomes a time when radiant colors are finally revealed through nature's chemical changes. Imagine if winter is a time for contemplative depth. These seasons could reflect the beauty that we so admire and is made visible only in the later stages of life. Ponder that!

For example, years ago during the fall, at a provincial meeting addressing issues of aging and care, a verse from morning prayer struck me. "The harvest is in. Our barns are full." Indeed, they are! This is a reframing of aging in accordance with the real experiences of life. Fall is a time of thanksgiving and abundance. Does winter's darkness have to be the last stage of our lives? Life-span development theory states that there is the possibility of growth and development throughout the life cycle, including the last part of life. May Sarton expresses this concept in her literary way: "We ripen to our deaths."

With strong belief in the value of learning, Sr. Sue Ann Orange, left, and Sr. Norma Bandi, members of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden, PA, minister as librarians in the motherhouse. During recent renovations, they were instrumental in ensuring the availability of resources and a place for study and reflection.



Call to Action

What is ours to do in regard to ageism as women and men religious?

- Call for study, discussion and prayer in our communities.
- Share and reflect on the real experiences of aging.
- Expose the ageist tropes we have been taught and continue to let lie unexamined.
- Consider a report from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, February 2021, stating, "With the presence of many older members in their institutes, they (LCWR) wonder if we need to make a cultural shift in the ways in which elderhood is valued."
- When viewing the demographic charts and reports, move from a mindset that says, "we are older and fewer but" to one that says "we are older and fewer and."

Such changes in mindset can lead to a counter-cultural view of aging, reflecting our belief that life at every stage is good, "very good" (Gen. 1:31).

From the Editor's Desk

Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D.

The word "ageism" first appeared in the *Washington Post* in 1969. Dr. Robert Butler was remarking on the stereotypical, prejudicial attitudes toward elders evidenced in the opposition that had arisen to a proposed housing project for seniors. A pioneer in the field of gerontology, Butler went on to become the founding director of the National Institute on Aging.



While research in the field of aging has expanded, it is clear that the impact of ageism continues in our society. The more we learn, the more problematic the bias becomes. Consider the groundbreaking work of Dr. Becca Levy, who demonstrated that elders with positive beliefs about aging live approximately 7.5 years longer than those with negative attitudes. Conversely, those who have internalized an ageist attitude evidence poorer heart health, physical strength, memory, hearing, and mental health.

I think, if we are honest, it's not always a case of experiencing others' ageist attitudes toward us. Sometimes, we are the ones perpetuating the covert biases of ageism. On a micro level, have you ever been rebuffed by people when you offered to carry their trays, or adjust their chairs? While the offer was made with the best of intentions, perhaps in simple courtesy, have you ever stopped to ask them why they chose to decline your help? What did your offer stir in them? What moved you to judge that help was needed?

Do such small things matter? Cultural shifts begin with individuals. As Sr. Imelda points out, the responsibility is ours. Life is good.

Resources

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