

Growing Old in America

The topic of growing old in America is one that I have connected with all of my life. I was fortunate to have many elderly people in my life as a child; they meant the world to me. Here are 3 examples:

- Raymond taught me that an old man can be a very gentle soul...a funny guy who would wiggle his ears to his youthful neighboring kids...and ironically, he, the gentle man, took me along as he shot chipmunks in the church cemetery....talk about contrast! I guess he did it out of respect for the dead and the "looks" of the cemetery.
- Mrs. Diedrich, a gypsy kind of lady who had a differing views than my mother was my first introduction to "we don't all think the same". My mother scoffed at the notions that I brought back to our home.
- Grandma Ruth, my all time favorite, would tuck my sister and me into bed, under many heavy blankets. I would say, "Grandma, please tell us about the old days". She always sat beside our bed and told and retold the stories of hardship, love and determination. My Grandmother experienced the influenza epidemic of 1918.. 675,000 people died as a result of this epidemic; among them were my Grandmother's mother, sister and brother. She then became the matriarch of the family and worked very hard from that day forward. Grandma was my role model of a strong woman, with a little ditzy thrown in for good measure. Also, her roasts were always over cooked and her gingerbread cookies were incredible.

Now I will pause for part of one minute so you can reflect back and recall those influential older people in your life. Think about how they made you feel, what they did with or for you. Hold onto those thoughts. PAUSE.

I must add at this point that this church has and still does have some of the most incredible "Senior Members" You are so inspiring.

Some history: Older adults in Colonial America were not only respected, but venerated. Old age was treated with respect, partly because so few people reached old age; only one out of 50 (2%) were age 65 or older. Not just those elders who held chief religious and political positions, but all old people were given special consideration. For example, church seating was assigned with the oldest members of the congregation near the pulpit, with the rest of the church generally seated according to age behind them. Much was written during this period to instruct young people on the proper behavior to exhibit toward elders. It was a Puritan belief that old age was a sign of God's favor. Respect for the old was viewed as an innate instinct, a natural law which any young person would obey instinctively. During this time, the respect and adoration of age was characterized more with awe than with affection. While power and prestige were reserved for older adults, emotional distance between young and old existed. This respect of older adults continued throughout the colonial period and increased to the point where people not only venerated age but emulated it. The powdering of hair and wearing of white wigs is an example of this effort by the young to appear older.

Things changed about the time of the American Revolution. Evidence indicates that the reaction against the elderly was part of the general revolutionary spirit of the times. Since elders largely controlled society in terms of politics, religion and property ownership, it was natural for a revolt against the "establishment" to carry with it a reaction against age itself. The new attitudes were manifested in many ways. Instead of powdered hair or wigs, ... toupees and dyed hair became fashionable ways to disguise one's age. Clothing was now tailored to make one look young; previously, to make one look older.

Terms of disrespect came into use. Gaffer, a term of endearment contracted from grandfather or godfather, became a term of contempt. Foggy, which had referred to a wounded military veteran, became a disrespectful term for an elderly man. Other terms also appeared: old goat, codger, fuddy-duddy, geezer, galoot and baldy.

GERONTOPHOBIA, the fear of aging and the aged, took many forms and spread to all age groups in society, including older people themselves. Although the average age of workers increased steadily as the general population grew older, discrimination against older workers began. This eventually led to a widespread practice of mandatory retirement, meaning mandatory poverty for many older workers.

The old system of family responsibility for the aged began to break down. The early 19th century witnessed the establishment of the first old-age homes or "poor houses" under a variety of names throughout the country. These were for older people who were unable to provide for themselves and who had no one else to provide for them.

Literature no longer assigned active and attractive roles to older characters. When older characters did appear in stories of the time, they often were treated as objects of pity or contempt.

Ironically, as the education of young people improved in the United States, the relative condition of older Americans grew worse. "Old" knowledge became outmoded. The moral authority of old age was eroded. Age prejudice in employment opportunities increased.

The cult of youth affected the behavior of older people as well as young. Even when people did not lie about their age, a kind of denial of age became common in such expressions as: "you're only as old as you feel" or "I'm 60 years young". A popular saying of the time was "age before beauty" which

implied age is ugly and beauty is young. Greeting card and novelty companies capitalize on this phenomenon. "Over the Hill" products feature prune juice, anti-aging soap, the "Old Coot" and "Old Biddy" bobble head dolls...all mocking the mobility, intellect and sex drive of the no-longer-young. Many Americans chuckle at such humor; others see it as offensive.

Aging, in our language and culture, is often equated with deterioration and impairment. However, the current generation of older adults is healthier, lives longer and has more money & education than previous generations. We are witnessing continuing changes in attitudes toward old age as society notices the opportunities as well as the difficulties of later life.

The thought of facing the difficulties of later life can make some people fearful. Concerns of the elderly include feeling worthless, "being a bother". The aging process will be a different story for each of us. We have some choices to make in life which can determine our last chapter. However, some people are given more and better options than others. The best case scenario is to have people around you to love and respect you no matter how your last chapter is written. We need to do this for each other.

Some statistics:

- The 85 and over population is the fastest growing segment....projected to grow from 4 million in 2000 to 19 million in 2050. Americans now turning 65 will live, on average, an additional 18 years.
- Old people with positive perceptions of aging live an average of 7.5 years longer than those with negative images of growing older.
- The Anti-aging market (including anti-wrinkle products, hair color, hair restoration treatment, breast augmentation) is projected to be worth 191.7 billion, globally by 2019.

Aging isn't just a biological process...it's also a cultural one. Different cultures have different attitudes and practices around aging and death. In our Western culture, being and staying young is desired; aging is often depicted in a negative light. Contemporary American culture's attitudes are largely characterized by fear. This attitude tends to cause the elderly to feel that there's something wrong with them and they're losing value.

Other cultures offer a more positive attitude. In Greece, old age is honored and celebrated and respect for elders is central to the family

Native American elders pass down their knowledge. Native American cultures traditionally accept death as a fact of life. Elders are respected for their wisdom & life experiences.

In Korea, elders are highly respected. Much of Korean regard for aging is rooted in the Confucian principle of filial piety, a fundamental value dictating that one must respect one's parents. Even outside the family unit, Koreans are socialized to respect and show deference to older individuals as well as authority figures.

In India, elders are the head of the family; they live in joint family units. Elders are supported by the younger members and they, in turn, play a key role in raising their grandchildren. Advice is sought from them on a variety of issues, from investment of family \$ to family rituals and intra-family conflicts. Their word is final in settling disputes. The elderly are often the most religious and charitable members of the family.

In African American culture, death is seen as an opportunity to celebrate life. Death is seen as the natural rhythm of life, which lessens the cultural fear around aging. African American funerals tend to be life-affirming and to have a celebratory air intermingled with the sorrow.

To sum things up, I'd like to close with a song by John Prine, a favorite songwriter of mine. John Prine grew up in Maywood, Illinois. He had a paper route when he was a young boy & there was a nursing home on his route. Through this experience, he discovered that he had a soft spot in his heart for the elderly. In this song, John expresses his respect for those in the last chapters of their lives. He and I agree that every stage of life is equally important and we all deserve respect and love. The name of the song is "Hello in There".

See YouTube: John Prine, "Hello In There".

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RfwGkplB_sY