



Consciously Aging in the Age of Denial

By Taron Puri, B.A., LL.B

As a 10 year old, I often went to the nursing home where my mom worked and visited with Mrs. Hansen. She was a kind woman whose eyes lit up and smiled when I entered her room. She would immediately take my hand in hers and welcome me with a special 'pet name' that she had given to me. I remember spending what seemed like hours chatting and visiting with her and although I don't recall the details of what we talked about, I knew from the gratitude in her eyes, and certainly the quarter she would often give to me (heh, I was 10), that my being there was meaningful for her. What I didn't know at that time was that she was one of many elders who had been deemed obsolete, burdensome and an inconvenience to her family and thus institutionalized, much like our prisoners, for the rest of her life! And these are the Golden Years?

As an immigrant, the culture I come from honours and respects our aging parents and considers it a blessing to have the opportunity to care for them, as did they for us when we were children. Certainly, care giving requires time and commitment however, how we experience it is more about attitude and perspective. Personally, placing an aging parent or elder in a nursing home is utterly unthinkable. Unless a parent needs on-going medical care and attention and for their own safety must be institutionalized, it is in the least our duty, and for me, more of a privilege, to care for my parents or other elders in need of care.

Our elders are an invaluable resource, carrying with them a special brand of intelligence called Wisdom, which according to psychologists at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin is "...an expertise that wraps information in the human context of life and relates it to generational and historical flow..." In simple terms, this

means that being years ahead of us, an elder has insights and perspectives about life and its challenges which in turn become invaluable guides should we so call upon them. Yet too often, we neglect to draw on this wisdom, instead choosing a short sighted, selfish route to living the life we want without the 'inconvenience' of caring for an elderly person.

A Culture in Denial

Sadly, we are a culture in denial. Our fear of, and ignorance about, death and dying has become so great that we treat aging as an incurable disease rather than a natural part of life and living. Despite its inevitability, we spend billions on plastic surgery in an attempt to mask all visible signs of aging and even more on medical research to extend our life spans and perhaps even find the fountain of youth. We have become drunk on the prospect of an eternal middle age and even resent it when one amongst us succumbs to aging – disenfranchising and relegating them quickly to nursing homes lest the disease spreads.

Interestingly, in cultures which hold a positive view of aging with reverence for their elders, such as with the Chinese, studies show that their elders are productive, healthy and active, and have terrific long-term memories right to the end! This is significant as a study, done by psychologists Ellen Langer and Rebecca Levy of Harvard,

“The bottom line is that we are all growing old, and to deny this is folly.”

showed that 'the near universal expectation of memory loss actually brings that fate upon us...and that the ...fear of aging is the single most powerful agent creating exactly what we fear!' Yet our futile and often harmful attempts to circumvent natural aging continue unabated, creating a huge industry feasting on the delusion of outwitting nature.

Then there is the greed factor– our own! As we hunger more and more for more, and get caught up in the doing, we simply haven't the time, nor the patience for the elderly who are not directly contributing to our objectives. Essentially,

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they become a burdensome inconvenience and get passed off to an institution to be warehoused. In speaking with workers at these facilities, I am told that often, the aged are managed by being drugged so that they do not create extra work. After all, it is a business and must be run like one wherein efficiency overrides empathy as a governing value. And for the families of these people, gone is their value as mentors, guides and simply wise elders who in their own 'being' alone bring a silent value which enriches lives and strengthens communities. Instead, they are discarded and forgotten, for that which is 'out of sight', is easily kept 'out of mind'.

Consciously Aging

It is time that the youth culture grows up and climbs out of denial. The truth is, to be fully alive, we must fully accept death as a natural part of living. We must see aging as not something to be feared, but rather revered - a graduation as opposed to a failure. By validating the life experience and priceless wisdom which our elders carry, we can partake of it and ourselves become enriched and fulfilled. Yet, as a holistic physician who studies aging, Dr. Stephan Rectschaffen eloquently states, "In our denial of death and the aging of the body, we have rejected the wisdom of the aged, and in doing so have robbed old age of its meaning and youth of its direction."

The bottom line is that we are all growing old, and to deny this is folly. By reframing your opinions and attitudes about aging from a negative to a positive, you create a healthy milieu within which to grow older, gracefully. Instead of investing time and energy fighting with the fact of aging, choose to invest in ensuring that you become a fully developed, whole individual whose focus is on the quality, rather than the quantity of life. And by investing in yourself through developing a positive and healthy attitude towards aging, you benefit both our elders as well as yourself, growing and enriching from their wisdom while developing your own. In the end, as you pass the threshold into the Golden Years, you can gracefully and wholeheartedly embrace the journey and know that since you valued those who went before you, you too will be valued as an honoured elder. ■

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