

## The Liberation of Growing Old

by  
Anne Karpf

LONDON: Why do we have such punitive attitudes toward old people?

Granted, the ancients did hideous things to elders unable to work but still needed food and care, but in more recent time, that has changed: In the 18<sup>th</sup>-century New England, it was common for people to make themselves seem older by *adding* years to their real age, rather than subtracting them.

Once upon a time, “senile” just meant old without being pejorative. Even “geriatric” was originally a value-free word, rather than a part of the lexicon of contempt toward old people.

Yet today, the language used to change the aging age composition of the population is little short of apocalyptic. We are told the “graying of the population” is an “age quake” or “a demographic time bomb.”

Old people are likely to be seen as a burden and a drain on resources, rather than a resource in themselves. Their only contribution, it seems, is to make worst “the dependency ratio,” a term that enshrines dubious assumptions about who will financially dependent on whom.

In 2050, Americans 65 and over are predicted to almost double in number to 83.7 million, one-fifth of the population. An aging population does pose real challenges, but increasing numbers of people of working age (as traditionally defined) are employed today while growing numbers continue to work beyond pensionable age.

In reality age can no longer be neatly correlated with economic activity. In reality old people are themselves significant providers of care, notably the childcare provided by grandparents.

To be sure, some older public figures attain “national treasure” status as cuddly, unthreatening George Burns-type figures. And while “ageist” language demeans and caregivers’ pay remains low, we no longer cast old people out into the wilds. Instead innovative services and goods are developing that seek to capitalize on the “silver dollar.”

But the social bias is real too. When a large sample of Facebook groups created by 20- to 29- year-olds was examined by a group at Yale School of Public Health, three-quarters of the groups were found to denigrate old people. More than a third banning old people from public activities like shopping.

Such “gerontophobia” is harmful because we internalize it. Ageism has been described as prejudice against one’s future self. It tells us that age is our defining characteristics and midnight strikes on a defining birthday, we will become nothing but old—emptied of our passions, abilities and experience, infused again with fragility and decline.

In their study comparing memory in young and old Chinese and Americans, Ellen Langer, a social psychologist, and Becca Levy, an epidemiologist, found the older Chinese people, who it was hypothesized were exposed to less ageism than their

American counterparts, performed memory tests more like their younger compatriots. Among the younger Americans, on the other hand, there were significant memory differences between the old and young. The beliefs we imbibe about our waning powers may turn out to be self-fulfilling. In effect, our culture teaches us how to be old.

The historians Thomas R. Cole and David Hackett Fischer have documented how, at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, the idea of aging as a part of the human condition, with its inevitable limits, gave way to a conception of old age as a biomedical problem to which there might be a scientific solution. What was lost was a sense of the life span, with each stage having value and meaning.

Perhaps this is why, as a 2006 study found, we mispredict the happiness we expect to feel across the course of our lives and assume we will get more unhappy as we age. In fact, the research shows the opposite is true. For my part, at 64, I haven't attained serenity (another stereotype of old people), but I am more able to savor life—and if offered the chance to return to my 14-year-old self, I'd run screaming the other way.

A student of mine nudging 60, recently called age “the great liberator.” Part of what she meant was old people simply care less about what other think but also, I think, our sense of what's important grows with age. We experience life more intensely than before, whatever our physical limitations, because we know it won't last forever.

How to enable the growing number of old people to live comfortably, meaningful lives, is a fundamental condition of equality, with benefits for all. If we make the world better for old people, we make it better for everyone, from stroller-pushers to wheelchair-users.

Maggie Kuhn, the founder of the elder advocacy organization The Gray Panthers, instead of making a fetish of independence, we should value the interdependence between generations. Thus age-friendly cities like Portland, Ore., rethink urban spaces to make them more accessible and integrate old people more into communal life. And programs like Cleveland's intergenerational charter schools, which provide lifelong education alongside grades K-8, breakdown the age apartheid now so common. Instead of seeing each other as generic categories, old and young can discover each other as individuals.

Age resistance is a futile type of life resistance. We can't live outside time; we begin to age the moment we are born. But the emerging age acceptance movement neither decries nor denies the aging process. It recognizes that one can remain vital and present, engaged and curious, indeed continue to grow, until one's dying breath. Then we need only to echo the wish of the British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott: “May I be alive when I die.”

**Anne Karpf** is a British-based journalist and sociologist, and author of “How To Age.”