

Reframing and Honoring Our Aging

“We carry this treasure in earthen vessels.” 2 Corinthians 4:7

You and I and every other 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 over a lifetime, seen – and thus experienced – as evidence of failure might well stop us in our tracks. That might be a good thing, calling us to reflect on its implications as we have internalized these beliefs.

This issue of Engaging Aging provides an opportunity:

To become more aware of our heretofore unexamined beliefs about aging and the negative effects these negative messages have on our life and well-being;

To discuss the various types of ageism to which all of us are subject, and practices which illustrate this discrimination of ageism;

To look holistically at aging, reframing it by using the expanding knowledge base of gerontological research to form a new mindset;

And finally, a call to action.

How our society views aging, with the subsequent harm that it does when we internalize these widely held beliefs, is vividly illustrated by a research study done more than 80 years ago called “The Doll Study.” The psychological study was done to test children’s (ages three to seven) racial perceptions.



Source: <https://blackdollsmatter.com/black-doll-history-the-doll-test/>

In that study, African American children were brought individually into a room with two dolls, identical in every way except one. One was a Black doll and one was a White doll. Eight or so requests were made of each child including the following: “Show me the pretty doll.” “Show me the bad doll.” “Show me the ugly doll.” “Show me the doll you like the best.” Finally, “Show me the doll that looks like you.” Consistently, the young children chose the White doll as the pretty one, as the one they would choose to play with, etc. In writing the final report, Dr. Kenneth Clark and his research partner and wife, Dr. Mamie Clark, note that when that final question was asked, some children would refuse to answer, adding that at least two children from the study “ran out of the room crying uncontrollably.” In reproductions of this study, the results are consistent with the original. Videos of these more recent studies are available on YouTube. To see the pain on the face of any of these young Black children when they are asked to “show me the doll that looks like you” can only bring tears to one’s heart.

What these young, beautiful, innocent children reflect is that already at that tender age they have internalized racist beliefs that society has hurled at them: “White is good and Black is bad.”

Internalized self-prejudice of racism revealed by The Doll Study has parallel applications in any other situation that looks at any type of self-discrimination such as: sexism, classism, ableism or ageism.

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 it. Because we are not generally aware of our implicit biases, there is a greater difficulty in recognizing stereotypical attitudes which can lead to actions of ageist discrimination, ageism.

Internalized Ageism

Our culture has given us messages since early childhood that this growing older in our later years is something to be feared and avoided.

We have believed it all, and we have internalized these beliefs to our own detriment and that of our brothers and sisters in our Institutes and in our society. It’s not our fault. Everything we have been told about aging is wrong.

Let’s look at some of the ways ageism shows itself in our ordinary, daily life. Before we do, however, the ground rule is: “No Judgment.” It is the mantra of Ashton Applewhite, internationally known anti-ageist activist and author of “This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism.” Ashton reminds us that we are all ageist; we have all internalized the messages bombarding us since our early childhood. Those messages continue yet today through the many media venues and through the allure of eternal youth put forth by the cosmetics industry.

Even spiritual writers and presenters, unaware of their internalized ageism, can convey misleading messages. Tracey Gendron addresses this in her book “Ageism Unmasked” when she writes, “Even the most well-intentioned efforts to educate people about aging are often

misleading and damaging.” When even well-intentioned but ageist concepts are brought into approaches to spirituality, we are left with a spirituality tainted with ageism.

Gendron again: “Everything you know about aging is wrong. It’s not your fault.” Our task, then, is to become more aware of the unexamined ageist beliefs we have internalized and unlearn them. Unlearning is not easy. And when we have held these beliefs for so many years, it will take time to unlearn them. Then we will begin to recognize the ubiquitous instances of ageism in daily life, as well as in organizational structures and practices. It is only when we recognize ageism that we can address and resist this social ill.

Some examples of ‘everyday’ ageism in action

Before we get to the issue of the “facts of life” about aging in our later years, let’s look at some examples of what we experience or observe every day.

- ◇ During a television interview, the interviewer makes a remark such as, “I know I’m dating myself when I say that I remember . . .” The interviewer is apologizing for his/her longevity – for being unacceptably old.
- ◇ At a birthday celebration the honoree remarks, “I don’t feel 75.” or “I don’t feel old.” The celebrant is actually, subconsciously reflecting that s/he does not fit into what s/he has learned from society about being “75” or “old.” This stage of aging in our later years is circumscribed by loneliness, sadness, depression, isolation, illness, lack of purpose or meaning.
- ◇ 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 implication is that aging is bad. Old is bad.
- ◇ Or, on the other hand, we might lament with a mutual friend about someone we have just seen after a long absence: “Oh, she’s aged so much.” The process of physical change is 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 a negative experience.
- ◇ We’re addressed as “young lady,” “sweetie,” “dear” or “young man.” The speaker wants the listener to not be embarrassed by being seen as an older adult. ‘So, we’ll just pretend you are young!’
- ◇ We make jokes about our age or age-related conditions: “Thank God wrinkles don’t hurt.” Although the humor may seem harmless and innocent, in general, self-deprecating humor about aging is always based on an alleged deficit or imperfection. Inasmuch as it belittles or undervalues, looking at aging as deficit-based, it is not helpful to how we accept, honor and cherish our aging. The *ad nauseum* ageist jokes spewed by late night talk show hosts about both Presidential candidates are extreme and equally loathsome.

- ◇ Beyond the personal encounters, organizational policies and procedures can get caught in foundations of ageism. Any policy or practice that is age-based is ageist, just as any policy or practice that is based on the color of one's skin is racist.

The “Good News” About Aging

Yes, good news!! The negative myths we have heard since early childhood, and which we have subconsciously internalized, are not true! That statement is not an opinion. It is based on research-based data! Gene Cohen, M.D., Ph.D. in his book, “The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain,” suggests that one reason for such negativity is due to the fact that up until the recent past, research dealing with older adults was always deficit-based. As a result, aging was viewed as a problem and dealt with as a problem. That reality was brought home to me a few years ago when a local university was weeding its library collection and offered the cast-off books for sale to the public. I went to the sale out of curiosity and saw among the books that the School of Nursing had removed from its library collection was one entitled, “The Problem of Aging.” Such was the context in which young nursing students learned about their patients!

To begin to see aging in its rightful light, aging is not a process that starts when one notices a gray hair, or when it seems a little harder to lift that suitcase into the overhead bin, or when it takes a little more focus to catch every word of a conversation. No, aging starts at conception and continues throughout our life! In fact, doctors evaluate the health of the growing fetus by checking the growth progress through the months of pregnancy, checking to see that the changes that are supposed to occur are indeed taking place.

So, aging is change, and it is a life-long process. The “go to” image of aging in our society, however, reflects only the physical changes through the life cycle. What we are calling aging, and what we are talking about when we talk about aging in this way, is really senescence. Senescence describes the physical pathway of every living organism: growth, maturation, decline, death. That is the pathway of the earthen vessel, not the treasure.

Once again, these are the changes in our bodies. However, we are so much more than merely our physical bodies. In addition to the passage from Corinthians, “We carry this treasure in earthen vessels,” Paul writes further in that same chapter at verse 16, “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, up to our dying breath. We all know that at some interior level. We know we are still the same person even though arthritic knees slow our pace, even though stamina lessens, and we shift expectations of productivity. We know that our longevity has deepened our ability to show compassion, for example, 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,” a

term that can become all too facile in its practical application in the presence of unrecognized ageism. For understanding the concept and applications of wisdom better, Cohen's book, "The Mature Mind," discloses an excellent understanding of and appreciation of wisdom and experience in an authentic and experiential way.

When we carry and believe our internal messages that describe later life as being circumscribed by loss and decline, we are generally looking at physical changes only – changes in our **body** – and attributing them to changes in our personhood: body **and** spirit; earthen vessel **and** treasure. A gross mistake. We all experience physical decline. That decline is uniquely individual for each of us, such that "when you see one 80-year-old, you have seen one 80-year-old." Regardless of the rate of physical decline through the years, this decline does not impact personhood, even when a person, because of cognitive conditions such as stroke or dementia, for example, loses the ability to articulate his/her personhood because of lost verbal skills, etc.

I am reminded of a story told to me by a Sister living in a retirement setting. A small group of the Sisters at lunch were conversing and a particular Sister's name came up. This Sister, a former university professor, was living in the nursing home on campus with a diagnosis of dementia. Her decline had progressed over many years, and she had lost her words, her ability to speak. The common response was one of sadness, of regret over the losses this dear woman, who with her marvelous intellectual gifts, had served the People of God so well. Everyone was of the same sentiment, except one in the group, a Sister who herself was living with a diagnosis of some cognitive impairment. She expressed her disagreement 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." Personhood.

Impact of Ageism on Our View and Practice of Spirituality

Perhaps the most universal and commonly accepted view of aging seen through the unexamined eyes of ageism is that later life is circumscribed by loss and diminishment. It is my hope that the readers, having read this far in this article, will see that view as one to be rejected soundly.

A common theme around aging and spirituality in many writings and presentations for men and women religious is that the task of later life, the call of spirituality in our later years, is that of 'letting go'. It is premised on the false belief that our later years are circumscribed by loss and decline. Yes, it has already been acknowledged that we experience physical decline that becomes more observable in our later years.

Regarding loss, we experience losses throughout our life. Loss is not unique to our later years. The first loss in life was being pushed out of that warm, close, intimate space of our mother's womb where we heard her voice, sensed her heartbeat and her breath. We lost that special relationship with our birth by our birth. Of course, because of that very loss, we were able to develop a deeper, richer, life-long relationship with our mother. So, we see that with this change, birth, there was a loss and a gain. So it is with change in every dimension of our life

Popular writing about aging and spirituality regarding loss seem to reflect only the “loss” part of aging. This is what calls for a reframing in accordance with what we now know about the real facts of life in our later years.

How many times have we listened to or heard someone speak using the analogy of the four seasons of the year and the human life cycle. Spring and Summer are fun to learn about and compare with our life experiences. Then Fall is explained, and we are exposed to bare trees having lost their leaves. And winter is stark. This much-used analogy needs to be reframed, starting with Fall. Reframing would show us the vibrant colors that beautify our landscapes. Our knowledge of biology would remind us that those radiant colors were always present in those leaves! Chlorophyll cover them over. As the hours of sunlight decrease, the chlorophyll fades out, and the colors that have always been in those leaves become visible! The beauty we so admire is made visible only in the later stages of the life of the leaf! Ponder that.

Some years ago, at a Provincial meeting around issues of aging and aging services, part of the morning prayer struck me. The meeting took place in October in the Midwest. The morning prayer appropriately reflected the season of Fall and Thanksgiving. One line stays with me: “The harvest is in. Our barns are full.” Indeed, they are! This is reframing aging in accordance with the real facts of life.

I have difficulty accepting the usual analogy of winter with the last stage of one’s life, with the last ‘season’ of our life being stark and barren, with a nod given to the Paschal Mystery, of course. I believe we have our winters throughout life, those ‘dark nights of the soul’. Life Span Development Theory states 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.”

In closing, this article barely touches the surface of aging in our later years and has not addressed at all what is ours to do in this regard as women and men religious. The issue calls for study and discussions in our communities, exposure to the facts of aging in later life versus the ageist tropes we have been taught and continue to let lie unexamined. I raise a question in light of the work of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, specifically a report that was made in February, 2021 in which the following was stated: “With the presence of many older members in their institutes, they (LCWR members) wonder if we need to make a cultural shift in the ways in which elderhood is valued.” I am in total agreement with LCWR’s suggestion.

I raise a further question regarding the demographics we get from time to time from CARA. Those reports and graphs continue to show that our median age is increasing and membership is decreasing. My question is this: How do we move from “we are older *but*”; “we are fewer *but*” to this: “We are older *and*”; “we are fewer *and*.” It calls for changing our mindset from society’s view that ‘bigger is better’ and ‘younger is better.’ It calls for study, discussion and prayer that will lead to a countercultural view of aging that reflects our belief that life – at every stage is good, “very good.” (Gen. 1:31)

