

Terry Jackson: Presentation on Aging and Ageism
“Words Can Help... and Hurt,” September 9, 2017

My name is Terry Jackson and I am an oldster. In a few weeks, I will turn 74 and my trophy wife is 82. Today I am here as a designated hitter for “Team Oldster”

Allow me to be Captain Obvious for a moment—you all hope to join this team and the good news is that with a minimum of luck and refraining from doing anything stupid you’ll make the team.

We are here today for a dialogue and I want to present a perspective that you may find a bit unusual. Just take it as food for thought. As I began to think what I wanted to convey today I found that it was developing into an essay format because there was so much I wanted to say and so many ideas and cross currents that I knew I had to boil it down. I hope I stimulate you to see things in a different way and to think in other categories

Our theme for this series of discussions is “Words can Help—or Hurt”. The Talmud says that the tongue is so dangerous that God locked it behind the teeth and lips so that we may keep it under control. I wish that were also true of our fingers on our keyboards. Despite all our caution and best intentions some bad words and bad ideas do get out there, but there are some good ones as well.

There exists a common misperception that William James called the psychologist’s fallacy. This is assuming, incorrectly, that one knows what someone else is experiencing. The reality is that the bull looks different when you step into the ring. You don’t know what I experience and I don’t know what you experience. A description is not the thing being described. The map is not the territory. Generally, we are not comfortable with “not knowing” and so we come to rely on stereotypes and preconceptions to profile reality and impose our idea of order on the world around us

Let’s go into this as it relates to ageism.

When I saw that this was going to be a topic my first reaction was “what the heck is ageism?” I had to go to Wikipedia to look it up. The word was coined in 1969 and it refers to an attitude that discriminates, stigmatizes or otherwise disadvantages a person on the basis of their age. Age is different from race or gender because it is a universal condition and it is as unacceptable as discrimination on the basis of any other aspect of ourselves that we cannot change. Age discrimination goes in both directions, up and down the ladder, but most of the focus is on discrimination against oldsters.

I think that one misconception is that aging is a progression into misery and that those who are older are rigid, unaware and afraid. Well I’m in the ring and I’m here to tell you that is not necessarily true. The psychologist Todd Finemore points out that there is an advantage that older people enjoy when it comes to combining real time information with a significant store of general knowledge. As we age our capacity to see circumstances as integrated wholes increases. Older brains are more diversely wired and use many more connections because we’ve made so many associations over the course of our lives. Growing older enables us to become more self-aware and confident, less fearful of being judged and to be authentically happy. Life does not get easier, but it does become easier to focus on what really matters.

Let's talk a little about the health and financial misconceptions about aging. Statistically around 4 to 5% of people over 65 will need nursing home care. Today in the US there are 44 million people over 65. This means that 42 million will not need chronic nursing home care. And there's still more good news. The average life expectancy of those who go to nursing homes is six months. So, it's just a short-term issue. My brother told me on the day he died that so many people had died that there can't be that much to it. Like I said before, the bull looks different when you're in the ring. Fear of death does not have to be part of aging.

As far as general disability is concerned approximately 14% of people over 65 have two or three chronic conditions that erode their ability to live independently. Yes, between nursing homes and assisted living that is over eight million people. But let's turn the numbers around. You've got a better than 80% chance of reaching the end of the line in pretty good order under your own steam.

How about age and poverty? The median financial assets, excluding housing value, of those 65 to 74 are greater than those between 45 and 54. Add in housing value and the median net worth of those over 65 exceeds the median net worth of all deciles 64 and below.

Wow—does this really mean that as we age we are not necessarily feeble, miserable and poor. Well, the odds are in your favor.

The Oldsters themselves are perhaps the greatest victims of "self-discrimination". They see all the negative stereotypes and like someone finding an arrow on the ground they think "this was meant for me" and they grab it up and stick it into themselves.

Let's turn things around some more and look at the positive side of our linguistic short hand. We say, "growing older". Growing—what a wonderful word. Not shrinking, not contracting, not diminishing, but growing. Jung held that maturation is a lifelong process. It is a tragedy that many of us live our entire lives with the erroneous idea that only during the first half of our life that we develop and mature. Practicing such a way of life ends up in our dying only half-matured individuals.

Lars Tornstam, a Swedish psychologist, has a theory of Gerotranscendence. Growing into old age has its very own meaning and character, distinct from young adulthood or middle age. He has conducted many interviews with elders and found common elements in developing a model of aging that highlights growth, interconnectedness, wisdom and understanding that comes from decades of life lived. It is a shift in meta perspective, from a materialistic and rational view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally accompanied by an increase in life satisfaction.

Some of the elements of gerotranscendence are:

- becoming less self-occupied and more selective in one's choice of social and other activities,
- an increased feeling, attachment and curiosity with past generations,
- a decreased interest in superficial or unnecessary social interaction,
- taking care of the body continues without being obsessed about it,
- a decreased interest in material things and a greater need for "meditation",
- positive solitude becomes more important,
- decrease in right-wrong duality is accompanied by an increased broadmindedness & sense of tolerance,
- the fear of death disappears and a new understanding of life & death emerges,

- an increased feeling of cosmic communion with the spirit of the universe, and a redefinition of time, space, life and death.

There is no guarantee that you will find this, but if you know that this state is possible and that it is there you can be alert to see it as it surfaces as part of your lifelong maturation. It is a gift and it is waiting for you to open the package

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote "for age is an opportunity no less than youth itself, although in another dress, and as the evening twilight fades away, the sky is filled with stars, invisible by day."

Don't stare at the sun—you'll be fine