
MATURE AND MAD ABOUT AGEISM

by

Mark Matthews

I am 52 years old. I am fit, mature and and in many ways in my prime. I have had sufficient experience of life to have a pretty good idea of what is what and perhaps more importantly my own strengths and weaknesses. Yet there is already pressure upon me to act old. You have only to look at situations vacant to realise that over 50 is not a good thing in terms of employment. There is much research that confirms this; it is not my imagination. Equally in social terms there is a tendency to an age related stereotype; though it tends to emerge later, around retirement time.

There is a great deal of fuss and even legislation to prohibit sexism and racism but the stereotype that leads to ageism is still a dominant and as yet unbridled force. It is true that certain elderly people show clear characteristics and that all elderly people show some signs of their years. But because some women and ethnic minorities also conform to their stereotype it does not mean that all do. Ageism is a prejudice whose time has come to be recognised.

There is growing concern that this prejudice is not only preventing older people experiencing growth but is also making them much more dependent than they need to be. In view of the changing demographic make-up of the population this is a concern of government regardless of any injustice done to individuals.

Those of us in the 'growth movement' are relatively free from categorisation but it is perhaps surprising that humanistic psychology does not have a higher profile in this area of concern. The response to the announcement of an 'ELDERLY ISSUE' was meagre to say the least. Even as we go to print there is only one reader who is actually known to be working with the elderly.

During the course of organising this issue I have had to discuss this subject with many actual and potential contributors. I have

also introduced the subject into social meetings to gain a feel for 'public opinion'. As a result it seems appropriate to look again at what being old or elderly actually means and what, if anything, might be done.

For the purposes of this article I am going to ignore the fact of disease and illness. Not because they are unimportant, which they are not, but because I do not have the medical knowledge to comment. I do nonetheless hold the view that proper nutrition, good habits, exercise, involvement and a positive outlook must make a great difference.

Initially I think it important to look at the concept of maturity which logically should precede being elderly. We use the term 'growing up' quite casually. What we are looking at, in effect, is not so much growing up but growing out of being a child. It is a rational and emotional development that leads to maturity: not weight nor height nor age. As we grow up we initially model ourselves, copy behaviour and mannerisms, but this is only the preparatory phase. We all, to reach maturity, must become ourselves and let go of that which is other. This in a culture which encourages both conformity and competitiveness is not easy. There are many who become old without ever reaching maturity.

In this respect Anne Coghill's letter is very pertinent. To digress for a moment: Anne is 72 years young and claims this is the happiest time of her life and she looks forward to the future with relish. I can vouch, as all the editorial committee can, that she is a real joy to be with. Her view that therapy in mid-life could make for a happier later life makes a great deal of sense for the individual and the carers.

It would seem that the crunch is whether one is elderly or old and this is not a question of chronological time. Elderly people can be young at heart, physically active and even romantic. They run marathons, fall in love, control businesses and lead governments. There is nothing specifically denied to the elderly.

It is very difficult to define the characteristics of the elderly except by defining what is meant by being old. This has little or nothing in common with the positive view of being elderly. My investigations indicate that one is perceived as old by certain commonly held criteria. A lack of energy, a loss of interest in life, emotional and social isolation, resignation and a loss of motility: free movement. The lack of being loved or having someone to love is undoubtedly a factor and is one of the problems of the nuclear family.

Our patriarchal society seems to have singled out the elderly for particularly unfair treatment. Society copes, makes allowances, and adjusts to the needs and demands of the disabled, ethnic minorities, women, gays and many other disadvantaged groups. We tend to see the dependence of children in positive terms yet we still actively encourage their independence. It makes as much sense to see the elderly in similar terms. Encouraging their independence and adjusting to their needs.

It is difficult to examine the issues in a short article. Prejudice, by definition, is blind. Ageism is a prejudice that has a structured dependency to support it. As previously mentioned the individual can best prepare for becoming elderly during the earlier part of life. The resolution of conflicts and a growth oriented awareness are obviously of benefit. A sensible diet and exercise are equally important. Exercise seems a particularly difficult area in that most people do not understand that simple movements are helpful. A good stretch for example- like a cat- is a great help. One charity called Extend is pioneering the use of simple exercises to music which makes a lot of sense.

One of the major arguments against the ageism presently in practice in the field of employment is the fact that not only does it remove the source of income but the social contacts and role identification involved in working life. However irksome work may be it provides a structure in life and time. Most people in employment spend over half their time awake at work or in activities related to work. The sudden loss of the structure, contacts and income due to redundancy or retirement is a major crisis for many. This is certainly an area open to improvement and one that is not solely altruistic; the experience and maturity of the older worker are valuable assets.

While this mainly applies to men at the moment it will not remain that way in the future. At the present women often welcome their entry into later years. The family is able to look after itself; children grown up and husband settled in his career. Hence they can devote much more time to their own interests. Yvonne Craig of our editorial committee spoke recently in glowing terms of the freedom she now enjoys. She is active in a whole host of worthy causes and feels that as she is now no longer a threat to men and is constantly being invited out to dinner and the theatre.

Which raises the issue of whether the older woman is seen as attractive. While she is, and they are, there is still the stereotype young model as the desirable female. The feminists got it wrong in making an issue about this as sexism: it is ageism and should be seen as such.

At a recent editorial meeting where this issue was discussed one of the themes to emerge was the fact of death and its approach as we get older. Our view seemed relatively unconcerned about death but quite concerned about sickness and the manner of dying. We, like one of our contributors, are concerned with putting life into years not years into life. As the Voluntary Euthanasia Society explained "It is much easier to live life to the full if there are no fears about pain or loss of dignity at the end."

One area which does need attention is changing the attitudes and stereotypes of professional workers and it is an area well suited to humanistic techniques. Equally it seems highly probable that if such a change were achieved there would then be opportunities to work with the elderly and carers and finally with the elderly alone. The potential for cost savings if the latent energy of the elderly can be channelled is quite enormous. Apart from the savings it would remind the elderly that they are still useful and needed.

Given the most rigorous examination I am convinced that even in the short term it would be cost effective; the long term benefits could be colossal. There is an old saying 'You are as old as you feel'. If ageism were to cease and the negative stereotypes with it then there is a better than average chance that a whole load of elderly folk would feel much better.

It is worth considering the fact that suppressed anger often leads to depression. The fact that anger is suppressed when it appears counter productive is natural. If elderly people are encouraged to speak up for themselves then much of their energy would be released. How about assertion training for the elderly?

In the U.S.A the elderly are a powerful political force. They have clout and must be listened to. They have an organisation called 'The Grey Panthers' which campaigns on their behalf. As Sue Tester points out this is not politically likely in this country. We need to get the idea of 'ELDER' back into elderly. Respect not pity. We who are approaching elderly must be concerned and act for those so weighed down they can no longer demand even to be kept warm.

The elderly today were brought up in an age when respect for elders was as natural as breathing and that courtesy was more important than wealth. Even in my childhood I was taught to stand to attention when a funeral passed and to touch my cap to ladies. To expect them to change a lifetime's habits is quite unreasonable. They do not understand the 'GRAB' culture.

I am angry at 52; by 60 I may be cantankerous. Think about it.