



## *New Age and Old Age*

*Alix Pirani*

---

Reading the accounts in the March issue of *Self & Society* of the early days of AHP raised for me again the question of what happens when a 'growth movement' with fantasies of eternal youth grows — and ages. And what happens to its elders — how far they are, as I sense from those accounts, in their 'anecdotalage', evading an honest assessment of what they have and have not achieved in AHP. Wisdom goes hand in hand with Folly, and that becomes very clear when we reach the stage of life in which we're supposed to be wise. Some assessment certainly has been going on, but unfortunately where it isn't visible a sort of ageism seems to develop as the 'young' de-

cide to dismiss us 'old' ones rather than face their and our disenchantment and limitations. This in its turn may lead to us dismissing them.

Some of what I've met with is disturbingly similar to what goes on in wider society: careless lack of respect for whatever wisdom the older generation has accumulated, intolerance, ignoring, and mugging. I've experienced granny-bashing from various directions in the humanistic psychology sphere over the years. And I see the older men who have enough commitment to stay around and not go absent also getting bashed. Are we 'fair game'? Supposed to take, gratis, 'their' parent-projections? (And there are

*Alix Pirani, a founder member of AHPP, is on the training staff of the Bath Centre for Psychotherapy and Counselling. She is the author of several books.*

ever more aged, difficult parents surviving unwanted these days.) Is it that we come to represent the archetypal crone, or Saturn even, reminding them that they too are mortal, will decay and lose their youth and beauty as time goes relentlessly on? Whatever it is, I don't like the way they arrogate our powers to themselves when it's done with a high-handedness and more than a whiff of analytic self-importance to justify their ruthlessness.

In British society the old have to battle to survive, and resist what Sidney Jourard once called the 'invitation to die'. People who lost their health, their limbs, their happiness, fighting the war which gave us all the chance to live are rewarded with pitiful poverty, thrown on the scrap-heap. Many of us who have been through much suffering and abuse within and beyond the human potential movement, and have striven to maintain the principles of humanistic psychology, don't want to be treated that way — especially as its traditions were developed substantially as a response to the horrors of that war.

As I grow old I become more like a child: clear-sighted but vulnerable, physically fragile, and dependent on the parent-figures in power — who now are my children and their generation. And if powerful people deny the validity of my sixty-four years of life-experience it's as though they're saying I might as well not have lived, because they don't value my life. At the same time I have to warrant being alive; I want to be in dialogue with the younger generation and discover what they most need from me. (Erikson says the old 'need to be needed'.) The young shouldn't be too proud to show their need and their inexperience; other-

wise they waste a lot of time re-inventing the wheel. The old, of course, are inexperienced in the business of being old . . .

Insofar as there's inter-generational aggro around in the AHP, I suspect much of it is unfinished business from last year's AHPP conference. The anger that's being vented on the few older men who were there should be directed at those 'absent fathers' who weren't there: the ones listed and aggrandised in the nostalgic reminiscences in *Self & Society*. AHPP is too loose an organisation. An opportunity for the movement to take stock of itself like that should have led to the 'powerful' AHP people being invited to participate in person. Where are you now, John Heron, Simon Meyerson, Vivian Milroy, John Rowan, Glyn Seaborn-Jones? What are your feelings now about humanistic psychology in Britain, and your responsibility in the development of its power — used and abused?

For us elders to be wise, for us to reconstruct the missing Senex and the Wise Woman, so badly needed in our world, you who now have the power of mid-life energy should use your active imagination to create those roles for us, rather than colluding with our fear of having our impotence exposed, and then vengefully undermining us. You too will be elders one day, and I hope you'll be able to 'define' humanistic psychology in Britain more successfully than we have — a difficult business since it's both a conceptual and a lived endeavour. Can it get past being the adolescent ego-trip or denied climacteric of immature individuals? I think so — if we care enough, and believe in ourselves.