

New Images for the Senior

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The psychologically & physically healthiest response to old age is to maintain the greatest possible level of activity & involvement in the greatest possible number of roles.

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—Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

This year I will turn 73. I am growing old. I know it. There is no doubt. I feel it in my bones. I have trouble remembering my phone number; at times I can't remember the day of the week. I ride a three-wheel gopher.

Being old has its advantages. Young women surrender their seat in the bus or train. (At times you feel like saying, "Hey! I'm not that old!") Cars come to a screeching halt, when I and my scooter want to cross the road. I can choose my own work and my own schedule. Following in the mode of Jenny Joseph's "I Shall Wear Purple," I find yourself donning a red cap, and running my cane along the neighbour's fence, and doing other naughty things just to thumb my nose at "the done thing."

Aging: The Mood of Passing-Away

It's strange how people try to hide the aging process. The drug companies make billions from producing their facial and body lotions, and getting rid of the wrinkles, as do the doctors who do implants and other operations to hide the onset of age. Others have decided to wear their age triumphantly as a badge of honour.

People have strange ideas about getting old and turning 65. Some seem to look upon it as sheer catastrophe. Said Charles de Gaulle: "Old age is a shipwreck." Nothing can be done except to take your pills and await death in a nursing home. Others try to take away the idea of dying by pushing a rubber ball round the greens as long as they can. Others again devote themselves to life in the rocking chair watching TV. 'Sociogenic aging' is a term that has been coined to describe the role society imposes on people when they reach a certain arbitrary chronological age. They must retire, are rendered unemployed and useless and are sometimes impoverished. After that transition, and in proportion to their chronological age, they are prescribed to be unintelligent, unemployable, crazy and asexual. In a society that denies age by resorting to face lifts, wigs, hair dyes, implants and other means and that indoctrinates the young to value youth rather than age, the results are destructive to the older adult.

People descend into their 70s and 80s in the midst of a flood of hoary old images that depict them as ugly, sexless, incontinent, senile, confused and helpless. Fear controls everything. "Do I dare eat a peach?" asked Eliot's old one. The fear of death was a permanent. It devolved into fear

of everything, especially fear of abandonment, fear of being alone, and fear of elderly abuse. Elders fear about the diminishment of capacities, of becoming another “Alzhy.” As relatives move in to look after them, resentment grows at their loss of autonomy, at dependence on others for their victuals and even for going to the toilet. They think about the past, and grieve over their failures and unfulfilled ambitions. A terrible sense of uselessness overcomes them. They fear the onset of dotage and second childhood and the final descent into nothingness: “sans eyes, sans ears, sans nose, sans everything.”

The question comes in the face of death: ‘who am I—now?’ ‘Who am I?’ is not an intellectual question that might be discussed in a philosophy class. It’s a universal question that every elder has to face. If death faces me, does old age have any meaning at all? How can I live a life that is going to disappear at any moment—poof!—snuffed out like a candle. Is there any human way to live out my old age, when everything is disappearing round me? Why take the trouble to live a full life, when it’s suddenly going to disappear? No sooner have we asked the question, nay, five seconds before we have finished asking it, we are already fleeing from it. The thought of taking that question seriously makes us blanch. We want out!

The escapes from the question, “Who am I?” are legion. Keeping busy may keep the question at bay—gardening, home beautiful, cooking, painting the house. Then comes the denial of death. We work hard to look and be younger. The males primp and preen, trying to get their remaining hair to cover the whole expanse of their balding head. The females try some liposuction, or some implants. They fiddle with concealing their right age. They come out with sophisms like, “Oh, these days, you know, 70 is really 60.” We try to avoid the topic of death all together. Or we get hooked on the artificial support system of poker machines. Some days we say, “I’ll decide what it means to be an elder, when I win the lottery.” Perpetual vacationism for the better-off is another escape: Italy, Mexico, the South Seas—cruises, one after the other, for those who can afford them. Bingo—for those who can’t. Some escape into resignation, like T.S. Eliot’s Prufrock: “I grow old, I grow old, I shall wear the corners of my trousers rolled.” They refuse to struggle with the conundrums of old age, withdraw from the community, become a loungeur, or an elderly beach bum.

In the movie, *Schmidt*, main character Warren Schmidt has just retired. He flicks channels with the remote, does puzzles, visits places from his childhood, and drives an RV round Middle America. His closing reflection grabs hold of the despair of so many people as death approaches: ““What in the world is better because of me? What difference has my life made to anyone? None that I can think of. None at all.”

So how does an authentic old person take this question with utmost seriousness: Who am I? What if the authentic response is something like this:

I am a dying entity,
who is nevertheless free
to live the remaining days of life that are given.
I am free to embrace death
as it comes, as a brother, sister, as a part of life.
I am free to live the hell out of my remaining years.

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Aging: the New Mood of Possibility

In the 60s and early 70s, something very new began to brew that would completely change the image of the elder. The theory of inevitable decline in old age, with its attendant physical, mental and spiritual weaknesses, began to be called into question by a series of clinical studies. Evidence began to pile up that opposed the inevitable decline model of old age. Other research at Harvard, the Max Planck Institute, and Duke University, for example, indicated that growth and deterioration of brain structures occur throughout the life span. For most elderly people, it turns out that there is also a great reserve capacity and potential for new learning and growth. As health science and financial means provide elders with the help for sustaining health and living longer, the number of seniors living viable lives continues to increase. Centenarians are no longer the wonder of the world.

A second thing that has happened is variously called the Age Wave, or the longevity revolution. Post-World-War- II baby boomers are approaching retirement age, or are there already, and their numbers are very great. Dychtwald called the phenomenon “the Age Wave. In many ways, elders have become the dominant force in society. They control 75 per cent of the wealth, and because they vote in greater numbers than young people they wield enormous political clout.” The upshot of it is that age will rule. Older people will be able to have their say and make it stick, because they have the numbers.

This is a tremendous time to be alive for older people. Elders today are laughing at gerontologists who say that age and growth are a contradiction in terms. Alex Comfort has told them that only 25 per cent of the disabilities of older people are medically based. They know that old age is not withering and fading. It is an ascent. It is becoming more than they have ever been. This is its purpose. Lao Tzu said that old age is life in its highest form.

Elders are demonstrating that they can take charge of their lives. They are able to learn. They are siding with the activity theory that those who remain active physically and mentally and socially will adjust better to age. At the same time they are continuing to live full, energetic and rewarding lives. They show up across society as valuable sources of skills, knowledge and energy. Some seniors are launching themselves into “a second trajectory” and beginning completely new careers after "retirement"; and the "retired" are being increasingly re-hired by companies who value their experience. Some of them are serving as mentors to the new hands in companies. Thousands upon thousands of seniors are serving as volunteers in hospitals, not-for-profits, and schools/

More and more elders are maintaining a combination of activity and disengagement. They can be wildly adventurous—going on wild-water rafting expeditions, taking up dancing again, going on long hikes, balloon riding—a whole range of activities that elders of old would have called suicidal. These days they are more and more in touch with the current of life. They are learning to relish their reputation for being a creatively feisty codger, for being outrageous and zany. They come across themselves not as worn out, but seasoned, able to maintain their mental vigilance, not ready to retire, but open to flexible and productive work life. They are on the

internet making connections. They start seniors clubs, Geezers' Brigades to get things done. One old guy published an online newsletter that was viewed by 20 million people. They find they are able to touch people's lives and make a difference. In short they are finding that age is a fountain, not a ditch. "Retirement at sixty-five is ridiculous," said George Burns. "When I was sixty-five I still had pimples."

Well all this is very exciting, but lying in bed at night, your mind comes awake with an overwhelming question. What am *I* going to do with the rest of my life? What I am I going to do with these thoughts of new things I can do as an elder that never before seemed possible: go to Rome, visit the Holy Land, start a new business, a new club, on and on. Your belly seems to be boiling over with creativity. But as you sit down to write down some of these ideas, you find yourself nodding at the desk. Sleep always seems just around the corner whenever you start to think of a new future.

Overwhelmed by possibility you look for a few pills that will take it all away and let you get back into "the ordinary life" of a senior. Like Scarlett O'Hara you say, "I'll deal with that tomorrow. "Today, there is the golf course and the cards club, and then bingo as usual.

The questions that arise now are not intellectual questions. They are existential: Don't I deserve a rest? Do I have to wind myself up all over again? Can an old codger like me make any difference? Haven't I done my share? ^I worked hard all my life. Don't I deserve a time of doing nothing?

Time continues to weigh heavily without commitment to something. But there is always tomorrow to make decisions about my future. So I find myself humming that old song every day, "Manyana is good enough for me."

The "no urgency" escape is very common. It's as if I am on one of those *Around the World in Eighty Days* balloons, and I'm surveying what's wrong with the world, so I can make a determination on what part of the global pain I want to spend my life. The balloon passes over the North African desert, and the thought comes, "I could spend the rest of my life over there using my biological skills to stem the onward flow of the Sahara. But the balloon keeps moving and I am over the Arab countries, and it occurs to me that I could use my literary skills to inform a wider public about the Arab attitude to their women and the poor, but the balloon keeps moving to Afghanistan, and I see that that country needs a lot of reconstruction. I could use my building skills there on setting up infrastructure, but the balloon has moved on. The decision never gets made.

"So how many years do I have and what, O what, will I do with them?" is the question. History beckons and the destiny of your advancing years awaits. Indecision builds on indecision, until, tired of the struggle, I dismiss the whole possibility and all the new images as "a pile of beans."

Or I turn into what Samuel Johnson called "an old screech owl" complaining and yelling about everything "wrong" with life, settled in the opinion that the great business of life is to complain, that I was born for no other purpose than to disturb the happiness of others by painful remembrances of the past, or cynical prognostications of the future.

But the *What do I?* question never goes away. The elder knows that the opportunity is there to take the rest of life and decide what it is going to go for. For example, some great musicians continue to play in public into their 90s. Some clergy continue to care for parishioners as long as they have strength left. Some writers keep writing as long as they can find the period and the comma on the keyboard. Some pick up entirely new vocations: caring for the ecology. Their stance is: the sun may be low in the west, but there is still energy in this old guy yet. So once again they put themselves in the cannon of history and pull the trigger. The fate of old age becomes meaningful destiny.

Today, a widely held theory states that the more active older people are, the better their morale. A high level of engagement with life is often seen as a criterion for successful aging. The activity theory argues that the psychologically and physically healthiest response to old age is to maintain the greatest possible level of activity and involvement in the greatest possible number of roles. As psychologist Erikson put it, "For those who are enjoying retirement, the primary satisfaction does not seem to come from open-ended relaxation and permissible laziness, but from new expressions of skillfulness and perseverance."

The Spirit Journey

Old age exists for the intensification of personal growth, for the enlargement and deepening of the soul. According to Rabbi Salman Schachter-Shalomi in *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*:

Extended longevity calls for extended consciousness. If our added years are not matched by an expansion of awareness, life becomes depressive. If I live to be eighty years old, but my consciousness gets arrested at the mental age of forty-five, I stagnate at that level, and may suffer from what psychologists call involitional melancholy a haunting sense of despair that asks the existential question, "What is it all for?" Who needs years, maybe decades, of such decline.

The journey into old age is serious business. Bette Davis used to say that old age is no place for sissies. The body-mind-spirit complex needs serious work. Perhaps the first challenge on this journey of intensification is getting and keeping the body in shape: at the gym, at the pool, on the tennis court, or, on what many seniors prefer, the walking path. Seniors need to get out there. Endless hours in the rocking chair is no way to keep the body in trim.

Then there is the mind. It seems that minds that are not cultivated during old age are likely to become prime prospects for Alzheimer's Disease. Many seniors are going back to school, others are taking some of the hundreds of courses available through university extension. Others again read extensively. Reading clubs abound. One way or another the mind needs to be kept active; otherwise it goes to sleep on us.

Every senior is on a spirit journey. Every individual is at a different place in this journey. This is a journey involving knowing, doing and being. Our life's experience is our knowing, our life's action or work is our doing and our inner journey is our being. It means the extension and deepening of our understanding of life and the human spirit. Knowing, doing and being take the journey with you. Elders need to organize their knowing in a way that gives meaning and

significance to their lives. Often people spend a long, long time delving back into the past, mainly to retrace their family's past. This can be valuable for some people, It can serve to tie a bow around the past, allowing them to move on, but you have to ask whether it yields any real knowledge except who begat who on the family tree. Elders need to dig back into their own lives to dredge the significance of what happened in their past, and use it as a launching pad for their future. Our roots are in the future, not the past.

The senior's doing is, perforce, somewhat different from what it was in younger days. The doing of the elder, is perforce less intense and sustained than a younger person's. It has to do with generativity: But, if the senior cannot do some tasks, there is still plenty of tasks suited to the elder: keeping an eye on the decisions being made in his community and beyond by councils, associations and government agencies, and making interventions. There is so much a senior can still do:

- Giving strength to those who are on the front lines of social action
- Mentoring the young and those not so young
- Championing those with really good ideas
- Affirming everyone and encouraging those who are despairing
- Volunteering at the local service centres

If they were given back some of their authority to impart wisdom, elders could help the family regain its equilibrium as a support system, rather than a pressure cooker from which most people are trying to escape.

It's a glorious thing for an elder to be able to champion those involved in social change, and to bring good heart to everyone who needs a kind word. How necessary it is these days for elders to take up the cause of the young and to lend a helping word or hand when they most need it. When you see it happening you know that this is what elders were made for. And it is wonderful to behold.

Providing time for being is crucial. Silent time alone is a valuable exercise for the elder. Sitting still and silent allows other voices to enter, gets you in touch with your soul. Fifteen minutes of sitting still and just watching what's happening within is something that can be done every day. Sometimes you just have to drop everything and go into silence. It was TS Eliot who wrote:

Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still

And In the words of W.B. Yeats:

We can make our minds still like water . . . and so live for a moment
with a clearer, perhaps even a fiercer life,
because of our quiet.

Being may be many different things for different people for some it might be a form of meditation or contemplation, or writing memoirs, or becoming more conscious of the mystery of the universe and caring for it. For some it might be being content just to whittle on a stick, or skim stones across the water.

It is the glory of the elder to live a life of caring, of trust, and hope; to be a sign of possibility for seniors everywhere. The elder can model active living in depth for everyone around.

To all those who have crossed, or are about to cross, “the Big 65 line” I recommend *From Ageing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older* by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Time Warner, New York, 1997.

This article derives from research into old age by the Oakley, Robins, and Stanfield families.