

# Three Myths About Aging

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When I turned twenty-nine, my friends sent me a birthday card that read, "For your last happy birthday." Though it might make you laugh, the message reflects the unhealthy attitude of most people toward growing old. Immersed in a culture that idolizes youth, Americans dread the thought of aging. We use soap that keeps a mother's hands as young as her daughter's. We pull out or cover up our gray hair. We even have our faces de-wrinkled. But time marches on. Sooner or later even the most well-preserved among us must face the fact that he or she is getting older.

I contend that we have been brainwashed into seeing old age as a disease rather than the last and most beautiful phase of human life, which God intended it to be — the golden age. I would like to examine three popular maxims related to growing old.

## **The good die young**

Everyone knows that Noah, Abraham, and Moses lived to a ripe old age. Who would question their goodness? Also, some of the best people in the world today are over sixty. My guess is that the saying is only a fragment of a longer one: "The good die young, but the better die old." This makes a lot more sense when you consider what it takes to reach old age.

Older people have gone through the test of time. They have weathered many storms, sometimes even hurricanes. They

have been purified in the fire of day-to-day existence. They have fought the fight and have run the race like St. Paul. And with what results?

Well, for one thing, the experience has made them wiser about life. They tend to have a more balanced view of the ordinary and extraordinary happenings of life. They see things more clearly in the light of eternity.

For this reason, golden-agers can be excellent models for those who are in the midst of life. By sharing their knowledge and experience, not in an authoritarian or didactic way but in warm concern, older people can cushion life for younger people. They know the ins and outs of life. They've been there. Senior citizens also can be the best encouragers. Their pleasantness and cheerfulness convinces others that life is worth living.

The accumulation of years makes everything more precious. As possessions get old, value increases: works of art, vintage wine, heirlooms, coins, even trees. How about people?

## **You can't teach an old dog new tricks**

This is an obvious generalization. It depends on the dog whether or not it can learn new tricks. There are some young dogs that have a hard time learning new tricks.

Life involves learning and adaptation. The last stage of life is no exception. As time takes its toll, the body loses some of its powers. What was once easy becomes a chore, even walking, talking, and eating. Former track stars and tennis champs get winded playing bridge. Compensations have to be made. Daily habits have to change. Careers have to change. The aging process demands that a whole new set of tricks be mastered.

But it was done before, and it can be done again. Those who are plagued with sleepless nights, arthritis, and dentures forget that the youth stage had its own problems: insecurity, longings for independence, emotional instability. Even the infant stage was not pure bliss, with the pain of cutting teeth, the discomfort of wearing diapers, and the frustration of learning to walk.

The key to serenity (and a real big trick) is to accept the sacrament of the present moment with patience and courage, to surmount its accompanying problems, and to focus on the things that really count.

Samuel Ullman said, "Nobody grows old by merely living a number of years. People get old by deserting their ideals." Keeping a firm grasp on ideals enables people to cope and motivates them to learn new tricks.

### Old age is the winter of life

This concept, frequently found in literature, has the seasons out of order. The way I see it, infancy is winter, when the total person has the potential of bursting into life but is hidden underground, waiting to be developed. Youth is springtime, middle age is summer, and old age is autumn. Old age is harvest time. It is a peaceful, mellow time of yellow, orange, and red. It is the time to relax, to reflect in thanksgiving on the past, and to live fully each day.

Did you ever hear of the man who died at sixty and was buried at eighty? When old age crept up on him, he decided to drop out of life and wasted one-fourth of his life.

Once safely out of the busyness of middle age, we are called not merely to survive, but to keep on living. Old age can be a time of discovery, a time to meet aspects of ourselves we never knew, to develop talents and follow up interests that were latent or smothered in busier, earlier periods of life. Old age is a time to cultivate friendships and pick up hobbies, a time to be aware of new things and to volunteer for new activities.

Finally, old age is a time to find wholeness, to "get it all together" in preparation for that ultimate state of life: transformation through death and resurrection.

I won't deny that the later years of life can be marred by aches and pains, fears and loneliness. But maybe this is just God's way of stripping away earthly things to make us more and more dependent on him. Then, when the moment of death arrives, we go rejoicing to meet our closest friend face-to-face.

Anyone afraid to age is afraid to live. May you be proud of your gray hair, and may all your wrinkles be laugh lines. □

*A new magazine for mature Catholics has been launched by Catholic Golden Age. CGA World features positive affirmative approaches to aging and is included with membership to Catholic Golden Age, National Headquarters, Scranton, PA 18503. Annual membership is \$5.00.*