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REFLECTIONS AND LEGACIES

Cheryl A. Lieberman, ACSW  
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She was propped up on a pillow, rocking in a rocking chair  
Looked like she might be lonely, like she maybe had words to share . . .  
Then we got to talking and soon we were the best of friends  
I told her about my problems, she told me how it was back then  
We talked about a lot of things I never thought she would have understood  
But that old time woman, she did real good

Jeffrey Langley and Holly Near,  
Old Time Woman, 1973.

Adjustment to old age poses special problems. It requires an acceptance of being old and restructuring one's life around decreasing energy and body resources. "Old age is neither inherently miserable nor inherently sublime - like every stage of life, it has problems, joys, fears, and potentials."<sup>1</sup> What is it like for an older woman as she experiences physical, emotional, and social changes?

For purposes of this study, twenty-five women ranging in age from 67 through 88 were interviewed either individually, in dyads, or in groups. Each woman was presented with the same basic information: the author was interested in and doing a study about what it means to be an older woman. They were asked to comment on body image, feelings, community changes, relationship patterns with friends and spouse, and any other experiences both positive and negative in their past, present, or future as they anticipate it.

Why were these women willing to share intimate feelings with a relative stranger? I believe this willingness to share can be understood in the context of Dr. Robert Butler's life review concept; an approach through which older people are encouraged to reflect on their lives, try to decide on what they will do with the rest of their lives, and pass on legacies - material and emotional - to the next generation. It is in the context of legacy that this article emerges - as these older women want to help younger people understand how they as older women think and feel. The key message that emerged from the interviews is that aging is personal. Excerpts from the interviews are utilized to convey the poignancy and diversity of the reflections.

". . . our unconscious mind knows nothing of old age; it clings to the illusion of perpetual youth."<sup>2</sup> "I have to make a great effort to convince myself that I am at present as old as those who seemed to me so ancient when I was young."<sup>3</sup>

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How does an older woman view her past and relate it to the present moment? How is the past reconciled in the present?

--"I don't think of myself as old. 'Act your age,' my granddaughter says to me. What does that mean? She doesn't understand that if I can kid myself a little maybe I can even kid the world. I like to think of myself as a person of vision not as just old."

--"You're as young as you feel. The only time I feel old - and you're gonna laugh now - is when I look in the mirror. I feel very young, but I look in the mirror and I know I'm older. I always think I'm so young in my heart. I don't like to look in the mirror too much anymore."

--"I'm not sure how I feel or if I want to tell you. What do you want me to say? I'm afraid to tell you how I feel. If I don't start talking I won't say things that might be real. I don't like to think a lot so I read or watch TV. If you don't mind that's all I want to say. You see I used to dream for fun - now I do it all the time."

Some pretend and it helps; others ignore; but, all find a way to deal with their lives. Perhaps, those who cannot, have given up, and died.

--"I used to love to wear pretty shoes and pretty hats. Now I have to wear old lady shoes and warm woolen scarves. I see the young girls and I hate - no envy - them. I used to be pretty, too! I'm not anymore but sometimes I pretend I am."

--"I sometimes think of myself the way I was at 30 even though I'm 80. I look in the mirror and I'm not sure I see myself. I loved being 30. I had dreams. I can't believe I look like my grandmother used to look to me - old and wrinkled. So I don't look in the mirror so much anymore."

\* \* \*

"We try to picture what we are through the vision that others have of us . . ."<sup>4</sup>

--"Young people push past me like I don't exist. They have no respect. 'Move, you old bag!' Is that a way to talk to me! No respect. If any child ever talked to an adult when I was growing up like that, he'd be punished. You ask me how do I feel about being older? Look how other people feel. How can I feel good if people keep telling me it's bad? No respect!"

Often respect shows itself in caring.

--"To be old isn't all bad but it's not so great either. People don't expect much from you but why not. I still think. I know how to say 'leave me alone' but I never have to. Just because I don't hear as well as I used to doesn't mean I don't have opinions. It, well I guess it hurts when no one cares."

--"I just started to feel old. Nobody on my block knew my age. I'm 75 now - no wrinkles. But I went to a doctor this week for my medicine and he gave me up. It was just this Monday and I started to cry in his office. He wouldn't operate, he said, because I wouldn't survive. I cried and he said he'd give me something for my nerves. He gave me up!"

A woman knows how painful labels, like old, can be.

--"I never look in the mirror in the first place. I always think young except when somebody with tender loving care treats me too good and fragile or unthinkingly says, 'Oh, that old lady,' then I feel old and I get mad. I'm too young for it."

--"Growing old was okay. Being called old is not okay. It sounds so ugly. I feel happy and energetic and everybody sees me as old. I get offered seats on buses and I'm just as capable of standing as anyone else. Where is women's lib when it comes to older women? I'm a person - older than I was 40 years ago but I'm still a person."

\* \* \*

"Anxiety strikes us at the very core of self-esteem, it is what we feel when our existence as selves is threatened . . ."5

--"I started feeling old the day I could no longer have babies. I had 13 babies - two are now dead. My body gave out. Too old to have babies! My life, my reason to live, stopped. Everybody laughed at me but a part of me died when I could no longer have babies. I was 45 and have felt old and useless ever since."

Being old means adapting to new roles.

--"Here's a feeling that I've had. I don't know if anyone else has had it. I always felt very young as long as my parents were alive and when I lost my parents then I began to feel old. I find I am the oldest living member of my family - my father's and my mother's side. That's frightening!"

Feeling old and feeling pain and loneliness are part of the older woman's experience.

- "Being old. It's pain - all kinds. Pain that never goes away. Pain in my legs, my fingers, and the worst pain in my heart. Not like a heart attack but the kind you cry inside from. All your friends die. Enjoy old age? Not me. I hurt all over (tears)."
- "When my husband was very, very bad sick, the doctor said, 'Your husband is an old man.' I said, 'Doctor, stop and don't you come near me anymore. What's your answer? Because he's old he can die? Please leave me alone'. He's the doctor but I told him."
- "When my husband died I was 73. I promised him I'd never remarry. I got very sick and depressed. I was lonely and felt trapped by my promise. I stopped trying to look so nice so men wouldn't come over to me. I'll pretend I'm content and look out for myself, I'd say to myself, but it hurt. I couldn't eat. I would cry. I wished I had never made the promise. (long pause) But one day I let go and decided I had to break the promise. Anyway he never asked me and I knew he'd forgive me. I had to. I was growing weaker from loneliness. I was dying, too. I wanted to live. I wanted to stop crying."
- "I need affection. I want to reach out and hug. But who wants to hug an old lady except somebody who feels sorry for you. I need to be around people. I go to a Center for activities but the best part is when someone touches me - an arm on my shoulder or touching my hand. I feel all warm inside. I go home at night and there's no one to touch!"

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". . . reminiscing is positively correlated with successful adaption to old age through maintenance of self-esteem, reaffirming a sense of identity, working through and mastery of personal losses, and as a means of contributing positively to their society."<sup>6</sup>

- "I'll tell you the truth. When I was younger, I was all wrapped up in my husband - helping him make a living and raising my family. I didn't think so much of myself. Now I am getting older and I don't see why younger people think older people are so fragile. They open (doors). Do they do it from their heart because they respect the older person or do they think that the older person doesn't have the strength? That's not true. I feel younger now than I did when I was young because I have more time on my hands. Since I belong here to the Senior Center, it is like my second childhood. I do more things now than I did when I was younger."
- "I felt older the day my parents were killed in an automobile crash when I was 22 years old than I feel now 60 years later. Old has nothing to do with age, it has to do with how you feel. When I was

22 I felt as though all reason to live left me. I had no hope, nothing to live for, and too much responsibility with no one to share it. Now I look back on my life with joy as a fulfilled woman. I feel young and alive!"

--"Me - I don't want to be young, again. I still put makeup on but my arthritis makes it harder. I'm not pretty but then I never was; but, I feel neat and presentable. My clothes are clean and I walk with my head up - with pride."

--"I was always fat and ugly when I was younger. I haven't changed very much but all my friends have. Age didn't change me much but it changed them. I look a lot less fat and ugly now compared to my friends. I like being old!"

\* \* \*

"For himself each man is the sole, unique subject, and we are often astonished when the common fate becomes our own . . ."

--"It's harder to be a woman when you are older. Your shoulders hurt when you put on your bra and forget the girdle! Stockings are a chore. Men have it easier. No one really cares about how they look. Even bending over to shave my legs is too hard. So it's hard for me to go out. I don't like wearing pants like you young girls do. I can't buy a dress with a back zipper. So I end up buying not so nice house-type dresses and I use roll-up garters and sometimes I don't wear a bra. But I never feel dressed like I used to."

--"Boredom. That's a problem when you're old. Not so much housework to do and no family to worry about. Can't watch those soap operas like my friends and arts and crafts I never liked. I can't seem to find things I want to keep doing. I wish I were still working. I was a good nurse and should still be working. You young people don't know what boredom is."

--"We have to go on with our lives. You can't help it. It can be painful. My son was in my house New Year's Eve and New Year's Day they called me, 'Come over, we need you'. I find my son dead. I lived through plenty. We still go on with our lives. We should be to each other like brothers and sisters and give each other the hope to live."

"Nothing is abnormal unless you first propose the dimensions of the normal; nothing is irrational unless you have consensus as to what is rational; nothing is unreal unless you agree on the tenets of the real."<sup>8</sup>

--"The biggest thing that's happened to me and my husband is our love life. We still want to enjoy, you know, sex - but can't. When we were younger, we kept the light on. He always said looking at me helped to excite him. Now that I'm old and my body isn't as, you know, pretty I want the light off. He doesn't but I can't help it. I get too nervous, too tense. He can't understand me and I don't see why he's so uncaring. So what happens? Neither of us is happy and we can't seem to talk about it. I dread going to bed at night!"

--"At our age you should take each day as it comes. If it's a good day, fine - enjoy yourself and do the best you can. You have today. Don't look for tomorrow. Tomorrow is coming anyhow. There's nothing you can do about it."

--"My son - he's a very nice boy. He cannot support his family and his mother. He is good, he wants to but he can't. His wife won't let him - just lets him ask about me - no more. She said, 'When you give him to get married, he is no more your son'. Is true? He is my son 'til my last day!"

--"Since I've gotten old I have new freedom. No children bothering me. I never liked raising babies but I had to. Today women don't have to. Oh, don't get me wrong, I love my children, but I love my new freedom more. You may not like hearing this but I don't miss my husband either. Being old is really living. Just wait, sweetie, you'll know what I mean!"

Each woman as she grows older experiences her own special changes, struggles, and joys as well as developing personal survival tactics. The more awareness professionals can gain, the more sensitivity and genuineness can be brought to the understanding of the older woman's needs, concerns, and rights.

These quotes are not merely facts. They embody the flavor of the person who lived them. These 25 women shared more than words as they talked of their lives. They left legacies in the moments they shared and in the reminders to us all of our humanness and common fate.

. . . She said, 'If I had not suffered, you wouldn't be wearing those jeans Being an old time woman, ain't as bad as it seems.' . . .

When I left her house that night my problems seemed so small  
And if I grow to be like her soon I won't have any problems at all  
I know I'll go back again to rock with my finest friend  
I'll love that old time woman until the end.

Jeffrey Langley and Holly Near,  
Old Time Woman, 1973

#### Reference Notes

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2. Martin Grotjahn as quoted by Simone de Beauvoir, The Coming of Age, New York: Warner Paperback Library, 1973), p. 433.
3. Andre Gide as quoted by Simone de Beauvoir, p. 436.
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5. Rollo May, "Contribution of Existential Psychotherapy", in Rollo May, Ernest Angel, and Henri F. Ellenberger (eds.), Existence, (New York: Basic Books, 1958), pp. 50-51.
6. Arthur McMahon and Paul H. Rhudick, "Reminiscing Adaptational Significance in the Aged", Archives of General Psychiatry, (10(3), March, 1964), p. 297.
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8. Anna Balakian, "The Poetic Reality of Anais Nin", in A Casebook on Anais Nin edited by Robert Zaller, (New York: Meridian Books, 1974), p. 114.