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The Peculiarities of Men Aging: A Collection of Anecdotes

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Men are reticent to share with others the slow realization that with age they begin to confront a world that they had not expected. They had not expected to grow old. Now that this is happening, men have few relationships that permit them to share their thoughts and moments of recognition. The anecdotes that men share are revealing in that they demonstrate basic human uncertainties about the later part of life's cycle.

Key words: *men, anecdotes, aging*

Old Age is Life's Parody

Simone de Beauvoir

I grow old . . . I grow old . . .

I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

T.S. Eliot

Introduction

The material available describing men and their personal experiences of aging is limited and lacking the intimacy that women have produced for each other and for purposes of understanding. Discourse on aging has provided very little on the experiences of older men (Fleming, 1998; Kosberg & Mangum 2002). Therefore, we have initiated this effort to look at the particular take some men have on their own aging process. This is a qualitative search for men's reflections on their lives at a certain age. The one guiding focus has been to engage men to share their personal reflections

on what it means *to be aging*. It is this experiential process that has been the focus of our listening to men as they have shared anecdotes both funny and thoughtful. The age “sixty” was chosen as the point of departure because it appears to be the new marker for men and aging. With greater longevity, age “sixty” has taken the place of “turning 50” (Sheehy, 1995, 1999).

The inspiration, in part, for this research was an incident experienced by the male author. As a friend and I engaged in a conversation typical of most male relationships little was revealed about our internal life. Yet, one day, my friend startled me by a comment he made. As our talk drifted from work and other matters related to work, my friend revealed that his 60th birthday was close at hand. In that moment, he turned toward me with a look on his face I had never before seen. He said, “There is something different about this birthday. My 50th didn’t phase me, but there is something different about turning 60.” He sounded both puzzled and revealing in this moment of openness, crammed with a sense of uncertainty that was unlike him. In an instant the moment was gone. The conversation quickly moved back to the outer world of being removed from the inner life. Strangely, shortly after our conversation, I recalled a conversation between Bilbo Baggins, the Hobbit, as he talked with the wizard Gandalf in the Fellowship of The Rings (Tolkien, 1954). Bilbo says to his old friend, “I am old Gandalf. Even though I don’t look it, I am beginning to feel it in my heart. I feel thin and stretched, like butter spread over too much bread” (Tolkien, 1954, p. 32). The two scenes seemed one for a moment. I too had been wondering about my own aging over the past months since turning 60. There was something about my friend’s and Bilbo’s statements that had touched a place in my own vague uneasiness as three score had passed in what seemed like a flash.

Unique Peculiarities of Men Aging

Life should be more about holding questions than finding answers. The act of seeking an answer comes from a wish to make life, which is basically fluid, into something more certain and fixed. This often leads to rigidity, closed-mindedness, and intolerance. On the other hand, holding a question—exploring its many facets over time—puts us in touch with the mystery of

life. Holding questions accustoms us to the ungraspable nature of life and enables us to understand things from a range of experiences.

Thubten Chodron—On Buddhism (Sharpy, 2004).

Richard Quinney (1998) writes in the preface of his personal ethnography, "all that we can know of anything that might be imagined as universal is known in the particular, in the everyday, mundane life" (p. xi). Personal ethnography is the telling of these mundane stories and in the telling "the lived experiences—shared with others—is our social reality. And it is the only reality we can know" (Quinney, 1998, p. xiii). Our intention is to suggest that gerontological research and studies provide important but very generalized cohorts of information around aging that can appear and feel very distant and unrecognizable in many ways. Now at the beginning of the 21st Century, as one ages chronologically, the actuaries tell us that you can expect to move through the "young old" period into the "old" and then into the "old old" phase or stages of life or is it the "serene sixties," "sage seventies," "uninhibited eighties," "nobility of the nineties," and finally the "celebratory centenarians" as Gail Sheehy (1995) has deemed life's passages. We do not suggest that these efforts at understanding be abandoned but that the personal and the unique can be useful in different ways and can touch us in very personal ways that might not happen with statistical findings and the models, phases and stages of life they construct.

The professional sciences of gerontology and geriatrics attempt at categories and stages do not capture the differential and complex nature of aging at the very personal level. Jeffrey Applegate (1997) has commented that these stages or phase theories proclaiming how one should develop and age "fail to capture the intricate complexity and variability of older men's lives, either idealizing them or catastrophizing them" (p. 5). The psychologizing of aging taking place within models and theories of aging leave out the complexity of experiences:

Characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, struggles, triumphs, good days and bad . . . their later years are likely to be composed of periods of relative serenity and well-being, bouts of depression and anxiety, and a range of affective experiences in between. The timing and intensity of these subjective experiences will vary widely

according to health status, finances, levels of social support, and other variables. Applegate, 1997, p. 5.

David Jackson (1990) calls for what he refers to as "critical inventories" that detail and expose personal accounts of a particular life history. Jackson (1990) finds the autobiography to be a part of a "process of critical understanding . . . that can play a part in undermining of those assumptions of what it is to be a 'real' man in this culture" (p. 3). Likewise, autobiography as a means to undermine what it is to be a man who is "aging" in a society unaccepting of aging. The intention here is to initiate this process through personal reflections on moments that are often fleeting and seem minimal. Yet, packed within these brief idiosyncratic moments are much deeper truths that may resonate with others and give some sense of passage into "aging" within this society. It is not our intention to analyze or interpret the experiences within some framework or to develop a framework. We prefer to hold the questions open rather than find the answers. "*Holding questions accustoms us to the ungraspable nature of life and enables us to understand things from a range of experiences*" (Sharry, 2004).

With the men with whom we have spoken, it is the personal moments of reflection upon which this work is focused. Specifically, it is focused on the situated moments in a life as told by men at a point in time.

Turning Sixty

According to Gail Sheehy's (1995) book, *New Passages: Mapping Your Life Across Time*, the years bridging the later fifties and early sixties mark the "passage to the age of integrity." Accordingly, one can look forward to a life of serenity and coalescence along with mature love, active risk-taking and the mid-point of a second adulthood [45–85+]. Pessimistically, the male author noticed that the colorful picture map in the opening pages of the book showing the progression of the stages of aging ended abruptly after the bridge into the sixties. After crossing the bridge into the sixties the page ended. "A very short distance," the author thought. There was some hope given with a very small note at the edge of the page with the titles: "Sage seventies,"

"uninhibited eighties," "nobility of the nineties," and the sought after "Celebratory Centenarians."

Aging is a social construct that has shifted and changed over-time. In the last one hundred years advances in medical technology and greater wealth have resulted in longer potential lives for men in our society. The average life span was 47 in 1900 and now, for men, the average life span is 73+ years. If a man was age 50 in 1996, he can expect to have a life span of 77.5 years. Given our present potential for longevity, age 60 is not quite old but it is close enough to sound old to some. It is this bridging age that is the subject of the personal reflections we have recorded in the following section. We have done some editing to disguise the persons who shared their thoughts and have used the first person to offer the immediacy in which the stories were told to us.

Men's Personal Moments, Anecdotes
and Reflections on "60 something"

The poem by Shel Silverstein (1981), *The Little Boy and the Man*, is an appropriate starting point of reflection:

Said the little boy, "Sometimes I drop my spoon."
Said the little old man, "I do that to."
The little boy whispered "I wet my pants."
"I do that too," laughed the little old man.
Said the little boy, "I often cry."
The old man nodded, "So do I."
"But worst of all," said the boy, "it seems
Grown-ups don't pay attention to me."
And he felt the warmth of a wrinkled old hand.
"I know what you mean," said the little old man.
(p. 95).

- I often find that I am startled when I see myself in a mirror or in a window of a store. For a split second, I do not recognize the older physical appearance looking back at me. I am surprised that the face looking back or walking along with me in the mall from store to store in the reflections of the windows is an older person than I think and feel I am in my own mind. How did you get so much older than I feel? This reminds me of a scene from

a movie, where the aging host of a beauty pageant comments about his age. He says, "When I look into the mirror in the morning, I say to myself, 'Who is that old man wearing my pajamas?'"

- Once when shopping at the grocery store, I had a chance to get the "senior discount," you had to be 60 to qualify. I do look, most of the time, younger than my age and have had people compliment me on how well I am preserved for my age. It was a Tuesday, that is when the senior discount is in effect and the store has a large number of "seniors" shopping. As I approached the check out person, I mentioned that I was a "senior" and waited. Nothing happened. The check out person keyed in the discount without making any comment about my "youthful appearance" or asking for proof, either would have done. I realized that I had been looking forward to "surprising" the check out person with my youthfulness and it hadn't happened. The clerk had recognized me as a "senior" citizen. I felt momentarily disappointed and resigned to my fate. It made me think about myself and my growing older, crazy but it made me seriously pause and think about getting older.
- I turned sixty just last month. I had been ignored by younger men many times over the past years and it should not have been any different on this particular day but it was. For some reason, the "ignoring" hit somewhere I wasn't prepared for. I actually stopped and thought of not being young and attractive as if I had skipped over thirty years of time to that day.
- My brother sent me a subscription to a magazine called "Men's Health." It always has on its cover a very well proportioned and stunningly muscular shirtless man who looks about 27. He always looks like he must work out seven days a week and not less than six hours a day. The magazine often has questionnaires and tests you can take that focus on your health. Each month I find some quiz or test to take to check on my health or body strength. I check off my answers and then add up my score to see where I stand. In one particular issue, after a page of questions, there was the final question and this asked about your age group. When I finished, I proceeded to add up my points and score myself. I was in the *danger zone*. How could

that be? I know I am not in perfect condition but the danger zone? The key factor turned out to be my *age*. I was in the 60 and over category for which I was awarded a grand total of 10 points. That number of points alone put me in the danger zone according to the scoring grid. Even though I seriously questioned the instrument's design and pointed out all of its flaws, I could not shake off my concern for my future or what might be left of it. I sat there thinking about my life.

- When I turned forty it was no big deal and turning fifty just brought a few pains here and there. It was when I turned sixty that was hard. I started to think about death, like it was just around the corner. I realized that the physical work I had to do at my job was really not as easy as it had been. I started to worry about not keeping up and about a younger man taking my job. I started thinking about retirement and what that would be like after 40 years at the same job. I really started to have trouble sleeping and worried a lot. I am better now but that was a hard time for me.
- I remember talking to a young woman and feeling, lets say "energized," and then it hit me that I could be her grandfather. She was being nice to me and I was aware of being, in a way, from a different world, from another planet. Here was this young woman as well as other young people and I had a very strong sense, like a light went on, that I was not part of their world. Not just intellectually but more than that. It was no longer my time or era.
- When I turned 60, I felt like death was approaching quickly and it was scary. My doctor had told me that my blood pressure was way too high and I immediately thought "this is it, get ready." A man does not like to not be in control, he likes to be in charge of things. I started to realize that I might not be in charge of this and that I do not call the shots. I started to get down and built a wall around me. I was lucky because my wife was able to help me out of it and now I am doing better.
- It was one day when a coworker walked into my office and asked what I thought about all the younger staff. I started to say something about liking them and he said that he didn't mean that. He meant about them taking over. They were eager and

young. I brushed it off but found myself thinking about it later that night on the way home. I actually started to think about retirement and my age in a way I had not done before. I could not stop thinking about it all night. There was no panic, just this realization that I was getting older and there was change ahead.

- When I turned sixty, I lost my brother and sister. That is when it hit me hard. When they died it was like death was real. I felt that with them gone I was stepping up to the plate with death.
- I realized that the older you get the less time is on your side, not far away is the end. It's the physical changes, your body can't keep up and you can't work as long as you did.
- I guess when I was younger, I thought I had all the time in the world and now it doesn't seem that way. It seems like its just over the next rise, death.
- It is funny, when I read the AARP magazine about the movie star or some well known person is turning 50 or 60 or 70 and they are people I see as my own generation, it always reminds me that I am getting old too. It is odd, every time I am surprised by it, like people just don't get old, including me.

Conclusion

These stories and anecdotes do contain the histories of the tellers as men in particular settings and under particular social and historical forces. This telling is subjective and far from objective. It does not represent rational knowing but felt, emotion and experience. It is not scientific and not generalizable. Jackson (1990) sees the consequence of the subjective as challenging the disembodied, rational abstractions men and science use to describe men's lives. He states:

The overemphasis on disembodied, rational knowing, that severs the relationship between personal experience and abstraction, often means that we become used to living from the top of our heads. This is done at the cost of all those hidden longings, hurts, pleasures, desires, and pains that make us all so much more complex and contradictory than our public presentations of selves suggest. (p. 273)

This effort is a different way of knowing that acts as a means for men to start to open to their emotions and experiences around aging and death. Critical life history work is a means by which men might explore their own lives and in the process have the opportunity to change. Jackson (1990) believes that men "need to find time to linger in the odd details of [their] personal experiences (mainly through sharing life stories), to dwell in them and ponder them together" (p. 277).

Thomas Cole's (1993) book, *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America*, searches through our history to explore our values and attitudes about aging. He notes that when we

focus solely on the abstract 'problem of old age,' apart from the actual lives and cultural representations of people growing older, the scientific management of aging . . . denies our universal participation and solidarity in this human experience. We humans are spiritual animals, who need love and meaning no less than food, clothing, shelter, or health care. (p. xxi).

This brief collection of anecdotes is a small step toward recognizing that aging has much more to teach us if we only listen. This is particularly true for men. Men have been nurtured to be in control and to see themselves as indestructible. The idea of this not continuing and what this means to each reader is important to hold open as a question rather than to find an answer to calm the fears and uncertainty men are expressing.

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