

Appreciating Our Elders



Christopher News Notes

“A people that does not have care for [the elderly], that does not treat them well, has no future: such a people loses its memory and its roots.”

—Pope Francis

IN OUR STAY-YOUNG-AT-ALL-COSTS WORLD, it would be easy to look at old age as a stage of life that should be dreaded or, at the very least, approached with a large dose of trepidation and fear. But folks on the frontlines—from brand new card-carrying senior citizens to awe-inspiring centenarians—know a well-kept secret about old age:

Membership has its privileges, and we're not just talking about discounts at movie theaters and restaurants. Old age is about far more than dealing with new aches and pains, gray hair and wrinkles. For many older adults, their senior years are a time of growth, purpose, peacefulness, and joy.

Although many other cultures around the world put their elders on a pedestal, ours tends to look the other way, perhaps because we don't want to see where we're headed ourselves. In the end, all of us lose out because the cliché is true: with age comes wisdom. Our elders have much to teach us, much to share, and much yet to do in their senior years, even if it's from a retirement community, wheelchair or a hospital bed.

According to a report in the *New York Times*, studies show that by 2050, the number of Americans over the age of 65 will almost double, bringing their numbers to 83.7 million, or about one-fifth of the population. Another study by the Yale School of Public Health looked at Facebook groups created by 20- to 29-year-olds and found that "three-quarters of the groups were found to denigrate old people. More than a third advocated banning old people from public activities like shopping." These two groups could be on a collision course if we don't recalculate.

"Ageism has been described as a prejudice against one's future self. It tells us that age is our defining characteristic and that, as midnight strikes on a milestone birthday, we will become nothing but old—emptied of our passions, abilities and experience, infused instead with frailty and decline," writes Anne Karpf in the *New York Times*.

At the other end of the spectrum, in places like China where the elderly are held up as models and mentors, senior citizens actually fare better on memory tests compared to their aging counterparts in America. "The beliefs that we imbibe about our waning powers may turn out to be self-fulfilling. In effect, our culture teaches us how to be old," Karpf says.

In other words, loving and appreciating our elders

Suffering with Dignity and Grace

In an interview before he died of gastrointestinal cancer, Lt. Col. Mark Weber of Minnesota recalled the powerful impact his own grandmother had on his outlook toward life. When he was only 14 years old, Weber started caring for his Grandmother Garofalo, who had a stroke, was confined to a wheelchair and couldn't move half her body. The experience taught him about enduring suffering with dignity and grace.

"I took [my grandmother] to the bathroom...But there was no lost dignity; it was just so natural. For me to be able to take care of her felt comforting," Weber recalled.

He said his grandmother's example helped him deal with his own periods of debilitation during his long illness. "When I can't do something, I find it much easier to accept offers of assistance," he said only months before he lost his battle with cancer. "Pride is not a barrier for me."

is not just good for older adults but good for everyone. So how do we begin to transition from fearing old age to celebrating it? Do we see our older family members, friends, and neighbors as a burden that saps our precious time or as a precious treasure that can ease our daily burdens, if not physically then spiritually and emotionally?

Like Fine Wine

"There is a fountain of youth: it is your mind, your talents, the creativity you bring to your life and the lives of people you love. When you learn to tap this source, you will truly have defeated age."

—Sophia Loren

Some things get better with age. Cheese and wine are perfected by the aging process. Classic cars are more likely to turn heads than boring newer models. The same could be said of classic older people. Getting older does not mean becoming useless or irrelevant, just the contrary. Today getting older often means finding new purpose, whether through second careers, hobbies, volunteer efforts, or simply jumping into this stage of life with gusto rather than reluctance.

In his book, *Rich in Years: Finding Peace and Purpose in a Long Life*, Johann Christoph Arnold explains, "Growing older can be a gift, but only if we surrender ourselves to God's plan. Then we can stop complaining about things we can't do anymore and realize that God is finding new ways to use us."

Rev. Billy Graham also tackles the topic of aging in his book *Nearing Home: Life, Faith, and Finishing Well*: "As we grow older, it's easy to feel that there is nothing else to conquer, so some retreat to the golf cart or the rocking chair. The truth is that we gain new experiences until we die. About the only thing that comes to us without effort is old age. But old age does not exempt us from fulfilling our purpose in life."

Even if our senior years are a long way off, Graham is right. Life seems to pick up speed as we age. So young or old, we can benefit from viewing our later years with anticipation rather than anxiety. Whether we're looking in the mirror or looking at an aging parent or grandparent, it helps if we can see our elders as beacons of light rather than shadows of yesterday. Think of older adults as lighthouses on the beach at sunset. Yes, they may be in the twilight of their lives but they remain a guiding force for all they encounter.

Maryknoll Sister Madeline Dorsey is one of those guiding lights. At age 96, she is retired from active ministry but still going strong.

"My bedroom is my chapel, in my favorite chair, in prayer," says Sister Madeline, who has served in six countries over the course of her 78 years as a Maryknoll Sister. She now focuses her energy on prayer, especially for the people of her beloved El Salvador. She's not alone in her determination to

remain a critical part of her community's mission even if she can't be an active part of the ministries that span the globe.

"We want to be involved as much as possible," Sister Madeline says of her fellow elderly sisters now focused on prayer. "Our concern for the poor is uppermost; so we pray, we are aware...yes, aware even at 95 plus."

When Sister Madeline was honored with a Doctor of Humane Letters from Le Moyne College in Syracuse a few years ago, the administration said, "Sister Maddie not only symbolizes a generation of extraordinary religious women; she herself serves as an example of creative generosity for us all—as a nurse, as a teacher...and now as she serves the Spanish-speaking community in New Haven. Her many accomplishments combined with her winning smile and sense of humor, make Sister Maddie a worthy role model for Le Moyne students who will face their own extraordinary challenges in this new century."

For those lucky college students, Sister Madeline will have taught them that aging doesn't have to mean declining, so long as they continue to seek out people and opportunities that will benefit from their experience and satisfy their longings to be needed, involved and valued.

Old and Bold

Marni Gillard, author of *Storyteller, Storyteacher: The Power of Storytelling for Teaching and Living*,

performs at churches, schools, and festivals throughout Albany, New York. She says she doesn't see society's attitude toward aging changing any time soon since young people drive the culture. But she has seen up close just how much society stands to lose when the elderly, especially those who are physically or mentally debilitated, are cast aside.

"A close friend who ran women's groups like Business and Professional Women...and was a life-long Girl Scout is now suffering from early dementia. I see that society—all those people she encouraged—have 'dropped' her. No one visits. Only occasionally does someone bring her a gift because it's a holiday. This has awakened me to how her gifts are underused and society could use them," says Gillard. "She knows the women in her senior houses have tales to tell. She can still hold wonderful conversations, just not recall what she just told you and so tells you again."

At age 103, Gus Andreone still lives boldly. He made news recently when he aced a hole-in-one, the eighth time he's done so since he began golfing in 1939. He told reporters he plans to continue playing golf for as long as possible. "As long as I can swing a club, even if I have to play three or four holes, I'm going to play golf," says Andreone, who is the oldest member of the Professional Golfers Association of America.

He attributed his success to luck but also to keeping his mind and body active as he ages. His wife, Betty, was by his side. She's got three holes-in-one under her belt.

So, as it turns out, another cliché is also true: Age is more than a number. No matter what number now defines us at this particular moment in time, we are all headed in the same direction. If we walk together and learn from each other, we'll find the journey becomes much more pleasant and much less scary.


**"It's better to light one candle
than to curse the darkness."**

A non-profit, founded in 1945 by Father James Keller, M.M., The Christophers encourages people to change the world for the better. Donations are tax-deductible. News Notes are published 10 times a year. Single copies are free.

Editor-in-Chief: Tony Rossi

The Christophers

5 Hanover Square, New York, NY 10004

212-759-4050 • 888-298-4050

mail@christophers.org • www.christophers.org

Christopher News Note 575

ISBN: 8755-69601

*"The afternoon knows what the morning never
suspected."*
—Robert Frost