

AGING TODAY

Vol. XXVII, No. 4

PAGES 14 & 15

July–August 2006

ISSN: 1043-1284

www.agingtoday.org

CREATIVE CURRENTS

'DON'T CALL ME OLD': HOW VIDEOS HELP FACE FEAR OF AGING

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The great thing about getting older is that you don't lose all the other ages you've been.

—Madeline L'Engle

An attractive 50-plus woman wearing a one-piece swimsuit stands in front of a mirror while a wiry older man examines her and sometimes pulls at the skin along her shoulder blades or upper arms. She asks nervously, "What do you see, Jimmy? Tell me what you see." In this scene from the documentary video *Josef's Daughter*, the woman, Ilana, has hired the well-known and highly demanding body-builder, Jimmy Caruso, as a personal trainer to address her fears of aging, which seem to center on her distaste for what she perceives as her deteriorating body.

When we showed scenes from this video at the recent Joint Conference of the National Council on Aging and American Society on Aging, our audience was stunned by Ilana's self-centered focus and inability to see her own beauty. They were also perplexed. What was she really afraid of? Why did she succumb to the objectification of a woman's body? Why could she not accept her physical appearance as a normal reflection of her age and her aging? What was she trying to control?

Although older adults tend to have a more positive view of their lives than those who are middle-aged or younger, many people still fight against growing old. American society retains many stereotypes related to aging and many phobias about being old. Up to perhaps the age of 60—if one is lucky—a person might be considered to be developing or in process; but after that, he or she is *aging*—with the connotation of older people going downhill, declining, heading toward the grave. Documentary videos provide excellent interactive teaching tools to help practitioners confront negative attitudes toward aging and outright prejudices toward the old. Effective productions elicit a depth of response from the viewers that they might not otherwise experience. Shared in a group discussion, such responses can lead to new insights and help catalyze new attitudes.

GERONTOPHOBIA

In our conference workshop, participants gained insight into Ilana's response to aging when they learned that she was coming to terms with several losses in her life—the death of her father, divorce, the loss of a business and the onset of menopause. What struck participants as most remarkable was the degree to which Ilana's reactions represented her own gerontophobia—her fear and loathing of her own aging.

Early in the video Ilana says, "It felt like my father and I were just going downhill together. It seemed

like all around me was just death and decay. That's all I saw. I felt like everything had ended. I got really scared." Those in the workshop expressed respect for her feelings, but participants also wondered whether Ilana was responding to her own aging based on loss of independence, fear of disability or impending mortality. At one point she concludes, "I've got to put a separation between old age and what I see of my body." Her embrace of extreme bodybuilding was at once frustrating and yet compelling because it provided insights into her own fears.

FACING AGING

In contrast, clips we showed from another video, *Let's Face It: Women Explore Their Aging Faces*, showed a range of women from their 40s to early 60s—all close friends—coming to terms with growing older in positive and affirming ways. The first segment shows Odil, in her early 60s, talking about the physical characteristics of her aging process. She does admit to being disappointed at times by her physical appearance, yet sometimes she can agree with and accept these changes. She concludes, "So be it. That's what it looks like. But that's not what it feels like." Odil defines her aging process, as "an adventure I've never had and will never have again."

At the end of her segment, Odil is photographed purposely standing next to a worn Oriental carpet hanging on the wall. She says, "It's worn; it's lost its fluff, but as a result, the colors come out, and the lines and the details show. It's becoming more and more beautiful as it's getting older. That's the way I feel. The older I get the more interesting I look—and beautiful: the fluff disappearing and the essence showing."

Workshop participants saw Odil's attitude toward aging in marked contrast to Ilana's in *Josef's Daughter*. Perhaps, Odil knew something about aging that Ilana has not discovered yet. Odil's response to age represented a different level of acceptance—of both realities and possibilities. Likewise, Wendy, another middle-aged woman in *Let's Face It*—and also the filmmaker—contends, "Youth is for the young. It is appropriate that little children look like puppies, and it's appropriate that the young ones getting ready to burst with babies have a certain look. And that is not the look I'm interested in." As Wendy speaks, viewers see images of children—then three images of her at different stages of her life—reinforcing her message. Wendy's approach to aging is not beset with either stereotypes or gerontophobia. She concludes that her status as grandmother has changed the way she feels about "age-appropriate appearance."

Why did these videos have such a powerful impact on the audience? We believe that the revelation of character and the effect of a compelling story are the two most important components of educational videos on aging. Are the elders—or those in middle age advancing toward their own old age—fully realized as individuals? Do we gain insights into their characters, attitudes and values? Do they have a good story to tell? Is that story revealed in a credible way?

Film is a subjective medium. Our goal is to encourage viewers to realize some of the implications of the drama of aging by focusing on individuals who are living that drama firsthand. Themes like the loss of physical beauty (at least the kind that is rewarded in our society), the loss of independence and relevance to the greater society are all outcomes of the characters, values and experiences of those depicted in videos we present. Viewers respond to and identify with the people portrayed because we use videos that respect the often muddled and contradictory paths individuals take when they assess their own aging process.

By mining the stories of those who are aging in workshops like this one, we hope to examine the aging process for its richness and insights into the complexity of the experience of aging in the context of the wholeness of life. ♦

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