

# AGING TODAY

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## AGAINST ANTI-AGING: A CALL TO EMBRACE THE PRO-AGING SPIRIT

By **RONA S. BARTELSTONE**

*Anti-aging.* Whenever I see that term in an advertisement I can't help but think of it as a kind of immediate death sentence. I, for one, am happy to be aging. I'm sick of hearing that we don't want to age.

I may not have the same body, flexibility or energy that I did in my 20s, 30s or even 40s, but I would never want to return to those times of my life. I feel better about myself than I ever did before, despite my increasing age, wrinkles and body changes. I am more confident, more self-assured and more content with myself than ever. I don't intend this article to be a self-congratulatory essay about my personal development. My point is, I think it's time for the boomer generation to recognize that there's enough ageism as it is without surrounding ourselves with so many products claiming to be the latest so-called anti-aging elixir.

### DEFYING THE STEREOTYPE

Instead of fighting the inevitability of aging, I vote for embracing a pro-aging campaign. Let's learn to age with grace, grow lovely growing old, and age into a sage later life. Let's take on the future with the same kind of enthusiasm with which so many faced the real world after college. Those of us in the field of aging, in particular, know full well that the stereotype of later life—as an inevitable downhill run—is false. But I think we have a special responsibility to embrace that knowledge and let others know there's a better reality.

I have been working with elders for more than 30 years. In 1974, I fell in love with a group of older adults when I helped open a senior center in the Rockaways, N.Y. I got the job because I was so dumb, at the know-it-all age of 23, that I knew nothing of the negative stereotypes about aging. The senior center was inundated with participants and I was the only programmatic staff person in the organization, so I had the elders run their own programs. We had people in their 80s and 90s teaching one another painting, woodworking, needlework, dancing and languages. These were no elementary pursuits—they were taught by real artists and experts. There were lively sessions on current events, parties and more life in the confines of that old building than I could have imagined until then.

I have been working with older adults, people with disabilities and their families ever since then. I must confess that most of what I now claim to know in life was taught to me by my clients and other older people whom I cherish. Even those I didn't always like taught me a lot about the aging process, the spirit of the soul and the ability to endure even the most horrific of life's circumstances.

### HAVING A 'FORGETTERY'

As I age, I also continue to be astounded by the strength and determination of people who are seemingly frail of body or mind. People are so easily deceived by the outward changes that time makes upon our physical being that they tend to overlook the inner life of elders. By choosing to spend a few minutes carefully listening to elders' messages, if not their exact words, people can learn that having a good "for-

getterly” —as a former client of mine would state—can help us slough off the old wounds that smart with anger and bitterness.

We can learn to allow tears to flow when we suffer grief and embrace the difficult along with the good as part of the experience of our lives. Furthermore, American culture needs to embrace the fact that sexuality, as well as the capacity to laugh and dance, can continue into older age and act as a salve for the pains of a lifetime. People can also learn that expressing appreciation and gratitude helps us hold fast to hope even when we are experiencing the most trying situations. In addition, aging offers the opportunity to learn that the nonjudgmental love of another person can make us feel that our lives are worthwhile.

Even when we don't learn these lessons from parents, who can often be a source of personal conflict, other elders can serve as role models for aging with grace, beauty and wisdom. One friend I met on a trip to Spain many years ago, a woman 40 years my senior, had the brightest blue eyes and wild, wiry red hair. She was traveling with her lover (a fact I didn't learn until after the trip), who was her equal in both appearance and spirit. Our friendship lasted for many years, during which she treated me with kindness, respect, nurturing and genuine love. For a time, she was my biggest fan, and she expressed to me the kind of verbal love and acceptance my biological mother surely felt, but couldn't verbalize. My friend was a joyous role model for aging gracefully with zest and humor. She had an insatiable love for life.

There have been others. Some family members, some friends, some professionals and many clients have taught me about the gifts of age that continue to shape my life. Some of these relationships have helped me when I was confronted with the crisis of caregiving for my own parents.

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#### MY CAREGIVING CHALLENGE

Having had a conflicted relationship with my parents throughout most of my adult life, I found that providing care for them presented a special challenge. As an “expert” on aging and an only daughter, I found myself becoming the primary caregiver for my parents, whom I love, but haven't always liked. I had been the rebel—the defiant one. I asked myself how I could possibly care for them at the time of their ultimate existential crisis. What I discovered, though, made it seem as if my whole life were intended to move me toward this very task.

All of the treasures given to me by my elders throughout the years helped me to mine my own heart and soul and find the strength and wisdom to nurture my parents. By the time my father died two years ago, what I had learned in the process of nurturing was that I could find forgiveness both for my father and for myself and accept our relationship on its own terms. My nurturing of him through his struggle with cancer enabled my father to learn to give me what I had hoped for all my life: He became the father I had longed for as a child. He learned to express his love, and I believe that it came about because of the lessons of age—his, mine and others'.

So what do we gain by labeling our products anti-aging—except more fear, denial and ageism? We have aging well programs, centers for healthy aging, “refirement” courses instead of retirement programs, and silver-sneaker groups that provide the boomer generation with better role models for their newfound longevity. Even those who are challenged with health and functional limitations have the ability to contribute to their families and to society. If we really want to become elders, wouldn't it behoove us to provide products and services that help us develop a pro-aging attitude?

Down with anti-aging product labels! Live long and thrive! ❖

*Rona S. Bartelstone is the president and CEO of Rona Bartelstone Care Management and Home Healthcare, Fort Lauderdale, Fla.*