

*"There are ultimately two choices in life: to fight it or to embrace it. If you fight it you will lose - if you embrace it you become one with it and you'll be lived."*

— Rasheed Ogunlaru

Older people in most parts of the world are caught in stereotypes of prescriptive models of behaviour that were mere functional patterns of the past centuries. The circumstances that gave rise to such old-fashioned models are noticeably declining in prevalence but the pre-set patterns persist making forward-looking segments of older folk victims of social injustice.

Demographically, all over the world older categories of the population do dominate thereby causing serious challenges to governments to make policy changes to meet the resulting challenges. However, largely due to persistent traction of outmoded stereotypes and social expectations governments even in developed modern states are lagging behind. As longevity and life expectancies keep increasing governments head to face more serious consequences in the future.

Take the issue of the age of retirement. An average retirement age of 65 years is no longer relevant as older persons become more and more fit and handy as they age today. The wisdom of their experience emerge as more important than biological age. However, these persons are relegated to forced retirement.

Today, more and more people of older age are compelled to retire when they are still able physically and mentally to continue to



## OLDER PEOPLE NEED TO GET BACK THEIR LIVES



**Shyamon Jayasinghe**

work. This causes associated mental issues like depression and anxiety.

There is the other side of the coin, too, as is evident when one observes how many older folk are participating in their forced retirement. The older stereotypes have brainwashed them to perceive that they are old and must withdraw from work. Many of them go on expensive river cruises as part of a bucket list of activities prior to dying. Travel agents make the money while the savings of these persons get thinned out rapidly over a big span of years left. Older people don't realise that their "old age" is going to occupy a long, long time or a bigger slice of their lives.

Losing a career and losing a job makes one lose one's dignity and self-worth. To their family and society they appear like parasites.

Many go into retirement homes while others keep pottering around the home gardens. Many Asian old men and women live with their children and here, again, they are made to feel redundant as time goes by. They run inconsequential errands in these homes while going to the doctor for regular check-ups becomes a self-imposed ritual.

Entering retirement homes in most cases is the worst thing that can happen as that seems to signal that death is close at hand. I wonder how many of you have seen the very funny British comedy, "Waiting for God"? This is about the plight of older folk who swell retirement homes.

Many Asian elders, once again, frequent meditation centres, churches and temples. All this is done while one is, in most instances, fit to continue to work and enjoy life. The growth of religiosity among the old is due to the brainwashed feeling that their useful lives are over. All that is left for them to do is to prepare for their departure by engaging in a meritorious style of life. Depending on whether one is a God-believer or whether one belongs to one of the Asian religions one's mind is set on peace in heaven or in a better life at the next birth or preferably a release from the bondage of Samsara. Particularly Asian people flock to a meditation centre, which is good business today. Yoga classes compete with meditation in a combined and burgeoning industry. Meditation is, doubtless, a most invaluable activity but to associate it singularly with older people is false and undermining.

The whole problem is the brain-washed feeling that one's fruitful life is over. "Giving up living," in this way is actually disastrous both for the individuals and for the wider society. It is antithetical to the fundamental urge of all living organisms. Living organisms are inherently life-pursuing entities. They pursue pleasure and avoid pain and instinctively seek protection (Freud's Pleasure Principle) against threat. That is their embedded nature. Life denial is, therefore, alien to the human condition.

However, both in the Judaeo-Christian tradition and the Theravadic Buddhist tradition this life is regarded as but inferior. In the former case, there is the superior

heavenly bliss awaiting the good. In the latter instance, one can look for a better next life or even for the extinction from the cycle of Samsara.

In this way religion constitutes one of the most powerful forces of brainwashing that leads elderly people to just hang up. Furthermore, one is given contradictory messages, namely that we are fortunate to have been born human on earth and that we should try and exit to the better place above or quit from the cycle of birth and rebirth for good.

Older generations that opt for this kind of surrender and renunciation of living of one kind or another must read the literature of those who stress the need for older persons regaining life and continuing a process of fulfilment. I came across a most positive and life-enhancing book written under the title, "The rest of your life is the best of your life," by a former American media personality, David Brown. Brown advises that one must eschew retirement and work oneself to death. "If you don't have something to do today, you are dead," says David Brown. You are not only dead but you are in the purgatory of boredom. Nobody needs you." Brown adds, "almost everybody I know who feels young, vital and sexy-no matter what his age-is working. If he's been retired because of company policy, he has gone off to other, and more often arduous, work."

George Bernard Shaw, who is said to have done his best work in his later years, pronounced retirement as a "working definition of hell."

David Brown comments not only about the need for continuation of working life. He goes the full length and advises the older person to live his/her life to the fullest. For instance, he emphasises the need for love in

one's life. This aspect particularly applies to older persons who may in some way or other be deprived of a love life. "Let a woman in your life," Brown says. Loving and receiving love are life-nourishing and energising activities for the human organism. The new world around us does not entreat us to treat sex or love as something shady. Sigmund Freud and numerous psychologists and psychiatrists after him have emphasised the role of love-deprivation in neurotic disorder and serious issues of depression and aggressiveness. Love can involve not necessarily overt sexual advance. A warm hug and embrace and a holding of hands may often suffice. It all depends on you and your chosen companion. Stereotypes to the effect that love is not for older folk are not only stupid but dangerous. David Brown is alarmingly and shockingly candid when he states, "My dear fellow, if you haven't learned by now how to satisfy a woman and yourself without an erection, you've been living in a tree. Books other than this one-or preferably, a woman of experience-will teach you how, and you don't need appliances."

Having said all the above we admit there is a limit to the regeneration of older people. The death knell will sound and then one must go. To one who has no belief in after-life death need not be worrying. On the other hand, death does frighten older folk. One has to realise "that death is a condition of life and constitutes half its rhythm." It is healthy to follow the Buddhist precept of living with the consciousness of the coming of death (maranassati). This will chasten us all and help prepare us for the inevitable end. But, then, no one experiences his own death. One may experience the process of dying and there is every justification for one to precipitate that if the process is painful and undignifying.

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