Book Review of:

by

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Some years ago, when one of my professional colleagues at a different campus was poised to retire, she made the statement that she would not list her title as Professor Emerita because she was still involved in professional activities and believed that being retired would hurt her chances for publication decisions and grant awards (In fact, she continues to teach online courses and write grants for her university.) The stigma about retirement that seemingly affected my colleague is one that itself may be controversial: Is there a stigma connected with being retired or is the perceived stigma itself a mistaken perception?

Perception, however, has nothing to do with the remarkable fact that medical advances have pushed back old age: “...The duration of the average American life has increased by a decade since 1950...” (Provan, 2009). When Social Security became law on August 14, 1935, most people did not live past age 66 to 68 so not much in the way of benefits was projected to be paid out to retirees, which helped convince those in Congress to pass this law. Today, what are the repercussions of living past age 66?

In Part III of *Gulliver’s Travels*, Jonathan Swift describes growing old as something to dread and avoid: his descriptions of the “struldbrugs” was that of unfortunate people who are immortal, but not forever young; instead, they were forever old, complete with the infirmities of old age. Of course, that book was written in 1726 (and amended in 1735), when today’s medical advances were not available to the struldbrugs, so that they would not have been able to remain somewhat young in both body and mind.

The question then becomes: How best does one live life between retirement and death? A description of this time of life might read:

To be over sixty-five in an age like ours is to feel bad even when we feel good. We are, after all, “old” now. Except we don’t feel “old,” And we don’t think “old”... We’re too old to get a job, they tell us...We’re too old to drive a car, [others] fear...We’re too old to get health insurance... (Chittister, 2008, p. 21).

Joan Chittister, Co-Chair of the UN-sponsored Global Peace Initiative of Women (and as she admits, she is in her 70s), has written an open invitation to one and all, asking that we use our older age in new ways in her newest book, *The Gift of Years: Growing Older Gracefully*. The essence of her book is her belief that we should
take the extra time that modern medicine has given us and make those years rich, full, and productive. Chittister poses questions that call for soul searching: Is life after retirement just “about waiting to be gone?” (p. xiv). Or is life after retirement a way to “come alive in ways [we have] never been alive before?” (p. xv). In fact, avers Simon Critchley, writing in The Book of Dead Philosophers, knowing that one is mortal can increase the quality of life. Chittister would likely agree with this contention now that we not only know that we are mortal but that we also are likely to have several decades to live after retirement.

Chittister recommends that we look back at our lives lived to determine “why we are who we are” (p. 4). This calls for deep reflection on a reader’s part—just what is missing in today’s fast-paced world, where speed and busy lives are seemingly valued, but that can, paradoxically, leave us with a feeling of emptiness because we never get to look at what we are doing, why we are doing what we are doing, and what that says about us people. How will our obituary read? What contributions will we have made?

Many people spend their lives: earning more money every year; turning out one more publication; winning another grant; earning another promotion. When the customary gold watch is awarded at retirement, then, says Chittister, we are left wondering, Who am I? I’m just me; and who or what is that? Without a job as an identity, we can feel bereft; after all, when meeting people in the United States, after the obligatory mention of our names, the next topic of conversation is the answer to the question “What do you do?” As Americans, we appear to be prepared for any response except “I am retired.”

Retirement age and therefore older age, says Chittister, should be about the life within us that has not had a chance to emerge; we need to share this inner us with the world in ways that we didn’t or couldn’t do while we were in our income earning years:

A blessing of these years is that we can come to understand that it is the quality of what we think and say that makes us valuable members of society, not how fast or busy we are (p. 12).

Old age, then, is not the nightmare that Swift wrote about in Gulliver’s Travels: where people who aged became caricatures of themselves and wanted to die but couldn’t. Swift’s view of older people is not what modern medicine has given us: lives that are more likely to be productive, without failing memories or health. Instead, we now have time—without deadlines, pressures, expectations, external schedules—to take our days and determine how we can feel fulfilled, in ways that we perhaps were not able to achieve during our wage-earning years. We now have the freedom and opportunity to choose what we will do with the rest of our lives.

So we can marvel at Dr. Ruth Cohen, who earned a Ph.D. at age 70, during her “retirement years” after a lifetime of experience in business. Dr. Cohen’s dissertation was about the healing that can come to people through the medium of art; her book that emerged from the dissertation is Art With Heart: Assisting the Work of Wellness, which is an expansion of Dr. Cohen’s dissertation.
Chittister points out that other societies choose to venerate those among them who are older:

In Hinduism, the one who embarks on the spiritual quest after retirement is the sanyasi, whose example of the final great quest is legend in the society...In Buddhism, the one who puts off personal nirvana to work for the enlightenment of the rest of the world is called the bodhisattva. In this person is embodied the best the culture has to offer, the sign of what it is to become better people as we age. (p. 35)

The question that needs to be answered here in our culture in the United States is whether “we see our existence now as having meaning for others, as well as for ourselves, or simply as a kind of enforced pause between the end of life that has already happened and the end of the body which will surely happen soon” (p. 46). Chittister says that it is precisely this stage of life that is truly liberating, with a whole world left to explore and try. What Chittister is talking about is not the frenetic travels of older people from one vacation to the next, but rather that this “point of life [is one] in which everything we have learned up until this point can now be put to use” (p. 50). We have the responsibility to mentor the generations after us in the values and ideals of a democratic society based on equality, respect for others and pluralism, according to Chittister:

The blessing of a commitment to accomplishment is that, as we continue to bring our considerable skills, experience, and insight to bear on the present needs of humankind, we will certainly become wiser, definitely spiritually stronger, and more than ever a blessing to the rest of society. (p. 54)

Most importantly, according to Chittister, “there is a purpose to aging” (p. xi). “Each period of life has its own purpose. This later one gives me the time to assimilate all the others. The task of this period of life...is to come alive in ways I have never been alive before.” (p. xv).

The Gift of Years: Growing Older Gracefully is itself a gift, one that can keep on giving with slow reading, also marked by returning to its pages time and time again. It is a book that reminds us of the essence of aging and so, should help guide those of us who are part of The Gerontology Center.

References


Swift, Jonathan (1735). *Gulliver's Travels*. 