

“The Coming of Age”

Part II - Simone de Beauvoir

How do the old view their age? What are their attitudes towards old age? What is the psychology of the old? These are some of the questions posed in the second part of Simone de Beauvoir's **The Coming of Age**.⁽¹⁾ The author has used the examples of the privileged few (writers, artists etc.) who were the only people to record their attitudes, feelings and views of old age. She has used this data in order to make some generalizations about the image the old people have of themselves and to find the reasons for their differing attitudes.

There are two attitudes that old people have towards that “unrealizable” old age. There is a positive and optimistic view of it, and there is a negative and pessimistic attitude that is detected among the old. The first attitude adds wisdom, maturity and joy to the life of the old and makes them enjoyable company for young and old alike. The second attitude makes them bitter, complaining and unhappy and thus undesirable in social and family circles.

These contrasting attitudes are caused by the experiences old people might have had in early childhood and in family relationships. Other factors such as their economic situation and health also influence the way they view old age. In addition, their status in society during the years of retirement, their useful activities whether in creative work or in service to their respective communities, in social, cultural or political life, may have an impact on their attitudes. In case of failure to be accepted by society and given an honorable place in it, old people succumb to isolation, brooding and depression.

The negative attitudes

Health plays an important role in developing a pessimistic view of old age. The body as a whole, with its organs and functions that do not work properly, is at the heart of the complaints and negative attitudes of old people. Some are indifferent to their health and speak of it in a detached and remote manner. They feel, since they are old, it's not worth going to the

doctor. What can a doctor do for them? Can he bring back their youth? Another factor is that many old people have been brought up in a society that paid less attention to health than is usual today. **Anxiety over health is** exaggerated due to an inferior status in society. The retired man often transfers the attention no longer required by his work to his body. For many, illness acts as an excuse for the inferiority to which they are now doomed. Some people make their infirmities worse out of resentment. Chateaubriand said that it was a torment to preserve one's intellectual being intact, imprisoned in a worn-out physical shell. Chateaubriand had fallen from his pedestal, he was alone in a century that was taking less and less notice of him; and he brooded over his grievances.

Gribouillisme

This is the psychiatrists' name for the attitude that consists of plunging into old age because of the horror that it inspires. The subject exaggerates; because he is rather lame he goes through the motions of paralysis; because he is rather deaf, he stops listening altogether. The functions that are no longer exercised degenerate, and by playing the cripple, the subject becomes one. This often occurs in institutions. Since they have been abandoned, the old abandon themselves and refuse to make the slightest effort. At the end they end up by being bedridden.

Lack of medical care and aids

Some old people cannot afford proper medical care or aids like false teeth, good quality spectacles, hearing aids, wheel chairs etc. When illnesses are not properly treated with surgical operations or medical care, they leave the old permanently weakened. Any physical weakness or partial failure brings about a renunciation that is followed by a rapid and general collapse.

The outsider's view

The revelation of age comes from the outside — from others. It comes as a shock to a man the first time he hears himself called old. When Casanova was sixty-eight a correspondent called him a “venerable old man”, and he replied very sharply, “I have not yet reached that wretched age at which one can no longer make any claim to life”. We find it very painful to accept the discovery of age of those who are close to us. Whether we like it or not, in the end, we submit to the outsider's point of view however unpleasant.

⁽¹⁾ Editions Gallimard 1970, Trans. by Patrick O'Brian 1973. See Al-Raida May 1, 1982, vol. V, no. 20, p.14, for a summary of part 1.

“Identification Crisis”

At the threshold of adolescence, the self-image collapses. Similarly, in old age there is a shattering of the reality of the old person. In both cases the psychiatrists speak of an “Identification Crisis”. But there are great differences. The adolescent realizes that he is going through a period of transition; his body is changing, and it torments him. The aged person comes to feel that he is old through others, and without having experienced important changes. His inner being does not accept the label that has been stuck to him. He no longer knows who he is.

The Working of the Unconscious Mind

The psychoanalyst Martin Grotjhan, states that our unconscious mind knows nothing of old age: it clings to the illusion of perpetual youth. When this illusion is shattered, in many cases it causes a narcissistic traumatism that gives rise to a depressive psychosis. Also, the adult associates age with fantasies of castration, weakening or obliterating his sexuality. Among those aspects of old age that are most unrealizable, this is the one that consciously and unconsciously, man is most reluctant to accept.

Positive attitudes toward old age

For a man who is sure of himself, who is contented with his lot and who is on good terms with those around him, age remains theoretical. One who has had a happy childhood, has been brought up in an atmosphere of love and affection, reacts positively to old age. Also if he has spent his youth constructively building up his interests and developing his potential, using his body and physical energy in moderation, similarly his view of old age is positive.

Optimistic view in spite of physical infirmities

Very often the burden of the body counts for less than the attitude that is adopted towards it. Claudel wrote: “Eighty years old! No eyes left, no ears, no

teeth, no legs! And when all is said and done, how astonishingly well one does without them!” Voltaire also had a positive attitude towards his age; he wrote “The heart does not grow old, but it is sad to dwell among ruins. I undergo all the calamities connected with decrepitude”. But he was wealthy, famous and revered; he was busier than ever, passionately concerned with what he was writing, and he accepted his condition with serenity.

Determination to keep fit and active

Exercising the muscles in good sports activities and keeping the body in good shape reveals the determination of the old to remain fit and active till the last day of their life. The will to keep up to date in all areas of life motivates the old person to use all his physical, intellectual and social assets for constructive and creative work. The mind and the body are very closely linked. Good health encourages the survival of emotional and intellectual interests. Most of the time the mind and body travel together towards their growth or their decline.

Conclusion

The immense majority of old people live in hunger, cold and disease. Such is the real condition of old people and we cannot be optimistic about old age. Experience is in direct contradiction with the notion that age brings freedom from carnal desire. At the first beginnings of old age the body may retain its former vigour or reach a new state of equilibrium. But in the course of years it deteriorates, grows burdensome and hinders the activities of the mind. The old person is no longer capable of what he desires. He forms a project, and then just when it is to be carried out his body fails him. When this happens, old age is experienced and the sufferer feels the anguish of losing his grasp upon himself.

Age is an inescapable fact of life that we try to avoid as long as we can until it takes hold of us. It is a sad truth which can, however, be made bearable and acceptable if society takes it seriously and responsibly through various ways by extending help, humanity and warmth.

**Azadouhi Kalaidjian
(Simonian)**