

## The Coming of Age (Part III)

In the conclusion of her book "The Coming of Age", Simone de Beauvoir makes some statements that have validity. She believes that if old age is not to be an absurd parody of our former life, then people ought to go on pursuing ends that give our existence a meaning. Such meaning can be found in devotion to individuals, to groups or to causes, social, political, intellectual and commitment to creative work. Old people should be prevented from turning in upon themselves by keeping aflame passions strong enough to give value to their existence. Often people are advised to prepare for old age by saving money, choosing the place for retirement and cultivating hobbies. Even with these preparations old people will not be better prepared for old age. One's life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation, compassion. When this is so, then there are still valid reasons for the activity and speech of old people. But Simone de Beauvoir claims that such possibilities are granted only to a handful of privileged people: it is in the last years of life that the gap between them and the vast majority of mankind becomes deepest and most obvious.

The author blames society for the inequality of standards between the rich old and the poor old people. The manual worker for instance, ages earlier than a privileged person. He is the victim of that terrible curse: boredom, as he retires, because he hasn't ever learnt to kill time. His gloomy idleness leads to an apathy that endangers what physical and intellectual balance he may still possess. When he escapes from the fetters of his trade or calling, all he sees around him is an arid waste; he has not been granted the possibility of committing himself to projects that might have peopled the world with goals, values and reasons for existence.

Simone de Beauvoir regards the remedies that have been put forward to lessen the distress of the aged, such a mockery. Even if they are given care and treatment for their health, they cannot be provided with the culture, the interests and the responsibilities that would give their life a meaning. Therefore she condemns society that is only concerned with profit and turns away from the aged worker as though he belonged to another species. She believes that old age exposes the failure of our entire civilization. She wishes the whole man to be remade and the whole relationship between man and man to be recast, if we wish the old person's state to be acceptable. She doesn't want a man to start his last years alone and empty-handed.

She claims that once we have understood what the state of the aged really is we cannot satisfy ourselves with calling for a more generous "old-age policy": higher pensions, decent housing and organized leisure. It is the whole system, she believes, that is at issue and our claim cannot be otherwise than a radical change in life itself.

It is apparent that Simone de Beauvoir has a critical approach to the political systems of different countries, particularly the capitalistic system which she finds responsible for the situation of the aged. When she condemns society for the responsibility it has for the wretched condition of her humble classes of old people, she has in mind the economic and political system primarily.

Certainly, her argument carries weight and has validity. However, I would like to keep that factor aside for a while and try to see what other groups can be held responsible for the situation of the aged. Society is not merely composed of political and economic groups and associations. Organizations for human rights, religious and spiritual groups, associations for women's and children's rights, church affiliated organizations and most of all United Nations sub-committees and various associations, may certainly have a role to play towards the amelioration of the situation of the aged.

Such genuine effort to provide not only improvement in the health and financial condition of the aged, but also cultural activities that give them some meaningful experiences, will definitely have an important influence on the thinking of the political and economic giant organizations and their leaders.

Enlightenment of the public through writing, research and media will also have far-reaching consequences for the situation of the old people. There is an absolute ignorance amongst the various communities in the world as to the real image of how the old live and how they carry their wearisome existence. The more people are made aware of the condition of the aged, the better the possibilities are for improvement.

Associations and even individuals, sometimes can put up centers of recreational and cultural activity for the old. To kill boredom seems to be a major problem that groups have to face if they want to improve the situation of the old. Centers which do not discriminate between the rich and the poor, and which are equally accessible for all classes, ought to provide meaningful experiences for the old.

As a final point, I would like to emphasize the importance of attitudes nurtured in family life towards old age. Love and respect for the old cultivated in the home and family atmosphere, becomes a determining factor in the lives of young people who, in turn, show their loving attitudes and caring concern for the old. When they see in the life example of their parents how respectful and loving they can be for their own parents, young people tend to internalize such values for the care of the old in their own lives. In the future, as leaders in their own communities, they carry on projects and wholeheartedly commit themselves to their success for the improvement of the condition of the old in their community.

The radical change in society for healthier attitudes towards the old should start right at home.

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