

## WHAT IS OLD AGE FOR?

By Quentin Holmes

“Ageism” is still alive and kicking... Just because someone is older, say over age 65, their thoughts and ideas are often dismissed or ignored.

*“It is high time for a change in societal attitudes. Given the importance of aging in our lives and the impact aging has on our families and our society, a new openness and even curiosity about human aging would seem more warranted. The time has come for our wondrous longevity to emerge from the long shadow cast by the vigor and virtues of youth.”*  
(Dr. Bill Thomas)

Imagine gathering a group of your friends for a fine meal and conversation. Desert has been served and everyone is lingering over tea or coffee... Someone makes an announcement that they have discovered an ancient path to human development that is all natural, subtle...but transformative, and requires decades to experience fully. ONLY mature adults may sign on...for the young are unprepared to accept what it has to offer. There is a murmur of general approval, and several of your friends say, “Tell us more.” The person then describes four key points about aging:

- 1) **Aging requires life** - When we speak of the aging of machines, buildings or cities, we are employing a metaphor. Inanimate objects can and will decay, but they cannot age. Aging is an active process that requires the force of life. A building does not live and thus cannot age, though its human occupants must. Being alive is a prerequisite for growing old. The challenges of longevity are insistent, they cannot be set aside by those who find them unpleasant.
- 2) **Aging is natural** - Aging is within us, not imposed on us. While environmental conditions can accelerate or retard aging, the process itself is part of the human being. How a species ages is one of its defining characteristics. A mouse lives two years, not 200. An oak tree grows to maturity in 50 years, not five. So it is with us – homo sapiens... When and how we age is written into our being.
- 3) **Aging is gradual** - We don't have to think about breathing in order to breathe, and we age whether or not we wish to do so. Aging is a gradual, rhythmic, highly-choreographed process. It holds no surprises, as its course and consequences are well known to all of us. No one goes to bed at the height of vitality and wakes up old. Aging is more like water flowing inexorably over a stone. This is the source of aging's power.
- 4) **Aging requires maturity** - Some movies, CD's DVD's and even books are available to “mature audiences.” We label these out of concern that the ideas and images that they contain will overwhelm younger, less-mature audiences. We restrict tobacco and alcohol for similar reasons. There are many things

best reserved for people with the good judgment that comes with age. Old age gives us access to a collection of experiences and insights that are beyond the capacity of the young to understand or fully appreciate.

*“Scientific theories about how we all age all merely accept without question the doctrine of youth’s perfection. They focus on decline and pay little heed to the steady emergence of new gifts and capacities. This tunnel vision is the root cause of their failure to fully explain aging. They fail because they are the product of a culture mired in misunderstanding of age and aging.”* (Dr. Bill Thomas)

*“Life is a gift of God, and aging is a natural part of living, involving the whole lifespan from birth to death. Older adults are not a different category of persons, but are simply those persons who have traveled further along on the journey.”*  
(Task Force on Older Adult Ministry – 204<sup>th</sup> General Assembly PC(USA), 1992)

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