

The Modern Tragedy of “OLD”

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At age 78+ I can address this issue with some authority since as a research social scientist I live within the boundaries of “OLD.”

To appreciate the nature of the situation that has arisen, we have to consider the contributing factors; in short, we need to examine the larger context. We can start out by recognizing the FACT that humans have vastly over populated the planet resulting in both demands on resources far beyond what the planet can sustain and negative impacts to air, water, soil, and climate that threaten the overall ecology of the Earth. Put simply, there are presently just TOO many humans – 7+ billion and climbing. Unfortunately, supporting this perilous condition are: 1) our increasing devotion over the last two centuries to an ever expanding global economy, and 2) the promotion of a “developed nation” standard of living throughout the less developed countries of the world.

THIS MODERN HUMAN CONDITION IS NOT SUSTAINABLE!!!

Now, especially over the last 150 years with the advent of the modern medical and health sciences, we add to this already critical economic and environmental condition a continually expanding and aging global human population. Unfortunately, at the same time its numbers have exploded, this group of older adults has seen its role in society greatly diminished. In the past, older adults served as elders and offered the wisdom/insights of previous times to improve the decisions of younger adults and community leaders. But modern life has become so oriented to the “benefits” of rapid change that the “wisdom” of the past is no longer much respected. With advances in technology taking the lead, life is all about anticipating and preparing for the future to come. And most “old folks” tend to be cautious and view rapid change as risky and undesirable.

In the last 100 years and under the banner of this futuristic perspective, we have seen the focus shift to 1) the celebration of youth, 2) the independence/freedom of young adults from any necessary commitment to their families and/or communities, and 3) the normalization of divorce which has shredded the integrity of the nuclear family and created a culture of non-commitment in our core social relationships. And correlating with these future oriented and individualistic shifts in perspective and social relations, older adults have experienced the institutionalization of retirement and the “stacking/storage” of older people in various separate “retirement” communities and elder care facilities.

The overall results of these conditions: we see increasing masses of older adults 1) who are disconnected from their careers, families and communities and 2) who are no longer leading lives that make much, if any, meaningful contribution to society at any level. Caught in this set of circumstances, a great many older adults are just EXISTING, not really LIVING. And at the same time these mostly isolated and “discarded” old people require more and more economic and institutional support to sustain their continued existence.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

- 1) In effect change can be positive or negative; it is often both. When humanity focuses only on the potential positive effects and overlooks the negative impacts, it puts itself at risk. Change is encouraged by the technological application of advancements in science combined with the corporate pursuit of profit. We need to be more cautious about adopting every new idea or gadget and allow the social and political realms to weigh in on the implications of the changes that are proposed. The premature implementation of nuclear technology and social media are two of the best examples of this problem. Artificial intelligence, robotics, and human engineering are on the horizon with both potentially huge positive and negative implications; they need to be handled with the greatest care at the global level. We cannot blindly put our faith in the ability of technology to overcome the consequences of our excesses.
- 2) Global human population must be at least halved. For a full generation, every woman who limits herself to one child must be celebrated and rewarded.
- 3) Population is one of the major drivers of economic demand, and corporations and the financial industry will resist any changes that “hurt” their economic bottom line. This is where the role of politics becomes crucial, but so long as the political and judicial processes in our representative democratic political systems can be “bought,” the conditions are not present to adequately address any of humanity’s key challenges: pace of change, population, climate change, rule of law, inequality, judicial integrity, international conflict, ecological responsibility, conversion to a sustainable economy, and, yes, the challenge of old age.
- 4) Older adults must be reincorporated into society. In this regard, every individual must contribute to society to the best of their abilities throughout their entire lifetimes. As abilities and interests change, engagement can change, but the very idea/goal of a desirable condition of total leisure in “retirement” must be rejected.
- 5) Society must give older adults more choices as they progress toward the end of life so they can avoid just existing and/or being subjected to ever greater debilitation. In behalf of supporting the sanctity of life, humanity must avoid confusing mere physical existence with what it means to be truly alive.

5) Society can reclaim the value of the spiritual perspective and recognize its importance in supporting social and ecological values, while curtailing the excessive pursuit of self-interest and materialism/consumerism. Much more on the issue of spirituality, its grounding in the human mental faculty of intuition, and the tragedy of its being co-opted by institutionalized religion is available on my website: www.dynamic-humanism.com .

6) Humans have to better balance the values of individual freedom and social responsibility. The importance of a stable nuclear family, extended family, life long friends, and community – all experienced within the intimate details of a stable space and place – needs to be much better appreciated and supported. Why? - because it is within this integrated domain of what really defines the concept of HOME that older adults are most likely to be sustained and retain meaningful roles in life. For 96% of human history – prior to the “very recent” advent of complex societies and civilizations, this integrated social, geographic and ecological condition was the norm. But in the “modern” era – and especially since the industrial revolution, this fundamental “package” has undergone progressive fragmentation with the consequence that the core level integrity of society has been reduced and older adults in particular have been set adrift. This is the tragic, isolated situation in which so many older adults in our modern hyper mobile and Me focused society presently live out their lives.

HUMANITY CAN AND MUST DO BETTER