

## Silver Threads

*A column created especially for people spending their golden years in Falmouth, written by these same senior citizens.*

### **“ ... and now I think of my life as vintage wine”**

By Barbara Kanellopoulos

“Age,” quipped Mark Twain, “is an issue of mind over matter. If you don’t mind, it doesn’t matter.”

It seems like good advice. Seeing that aging is inevitable and - at least for humans – universal, all you need to do is resign yourself. As someone once said, it’s better than the alternative. But even Mark Twain, who lived to be seventy-five, would have to admit that growing old is really not that simple.

First of all, adjusting to aging is a slow process. Our inner self is totally unprepared to grow old; it’s still adjusting to being middle-aged. It often takes a shock of recognition to get the inner self aligned with that outer, aging self. In my sixties, while hiking with a friend, a niece called to ask, “How are you two old people doing?” It took a moment before it dawned on me that she wasn’t joking. Before then, I hadn’t seen myself as really old.

Adjusting to his chronological age was difficult for E.B. White, too. When he was seventy, he wrote, “Old age is a special problem for me because I’ve never been able to shed the mental image I have of myself – a lad of about nineteen.”

How we are seen by others also affects our adjustment to aging. Because the social order in Colonial America venerated the elderly, people liked growing old. They actually made themselves look older than they were. 16<sup>th</sup> century demographics partly accounts for the elevation of old people; fewer than 2% of the population were 65 and over. According to historian David H. Fischer (*Growing Old in America*, Oxford University Press), the few elderly people that constituted society’s elite were respected but not much loved.

American society's relation to its old population has changed dramatically since then. By the mid 1900s, the social ranks shifted and youth trumped age. The writer J.B. Priestley (1894-1984) said, "There was no respect for youth when I was young, and now that I am old, there is no respect for age. I missed it coming and going."

In our own time, age and the aging process are disparaged. Internet and television advertising repeatedly shows the horrors of sagging skin, hair loss, diminished libido, and other ills that aging flesh is heir to. Products like skin cream and hair color are cleverly marketed as "anti-aging." Magazine and newspaper articles insist that old people need not – indeed should not – look old. "Younger Every Day! 365 Ways to Rejuvenate Your Body and Revitalize Your Spirit," shouts one headline. The media's message to older adults is clear: don't resign yourself to growing old. Deny it.

Of course, the message is market-driven, keyed to get the country's forty million older adults to part with their money. But it reflects society's preference for youthfulness and youthful beauty. The media's message works. 85,000 men and women sixty-five and older had cosmetic surgery in 2010. It appears that many of us are not adjusting to aging with equanimity.

Prejudice against age groups (particularly the elderly), is known as ageism; it's another way in which society negatively influences our view of aging. The privileging of one age group over another fosters this prejudice. It's not an exaggeration to say that ageism destroys human relationships. Consider the ageism exhibited by former Senator Alan Simpson on youtube. He called out to the youth of America to oppose the "old coots" on social security who are "robbing" the national treasury. Senator Simpson, 81, thinks that young adults will only pay attention to a serious issue if it's clothed in mockery and ridicule. Pitting one age group against another while insulting both is raising ageism to a new level

Portrayals of old people as stingy, comical, forgetful, rigid, incompetent, foolish, or out-of-touch are damaging to everyone. They misrepresent the elderly and they prejudice the young. Because

unexamined stereotypes are pervasive, skilled people who choose to work beyond retirement age are often reticent to reveal their ages.

To counter the view that the aging process entails nothing but loss, nothing but diminishment, we need only look at the contributions that older adults make to the Falmouth community. They are Falmouth's "social glue." They serve on town committees and commissions, they work in soup kitchens and service centers, they form networks to protect and support vulnerable neighbors, they vote, they support local government and participate in civic affairs, they donate to charity, they attend churches, they take care of children, they work to protect the environment, they shop locally and use local services, they are leaders of clubs and groups. Their economic and social contributions are substantial.

With a little editing, Mark Twain's witticism makes a lot of sense. Age *is* mind over matter. We don't mind aging when our lives matter.

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*Neighborhood Falmouth is a nonprofit, membership organization, operating since 2009 to help Falmouth seniors live safely and comfortably in their own homes. For more information on joining, volunteering, and donating, call 508-564-7543; or visit [www.neighborhoodfalmouth.org](http://www.neighborhoodfalmouth.org).*