

Ageism: the Two Archetypal Stories



Do you know good people who come out with crude ageist comments from time to time? Sometimes they are just jokes that seem harmless enough – unless overheard by the older people concerned (or you are the older person) and then the reality hits home. Sometimes what seem like soft-hearted comments can wilt under a closer look; lines such as, "Look at that nice old couple over there, holding hands. They're so sweet." We wouldn't say that about adults holding hands, and probably not about teenagers either. We might say it about children, and young children at that or toddlers. What is going on that any of us might say these things about older people? And what effect does it have?

There are two archetypal stories about ageing found in cultures across the world and down through the ages. One story is destructive and wounding; the other is constructive and kind, and one of these stories may predominate in a given culture. We are familiar with both stories and have heard them many times explicitly as well as implicitly on the edge of awareness.

The first story about ageing is uppermost in contemporary western culture. It is negative, detrimental, and sometimes destructive and cruel in its effect on older humans. It springs from the youth-worshiping culture that we have been living for a long time, reinforced daily through popular culture including advertising, movies, popular stories, etc. I read statistics that claimed 87% of TV shows feature people under 38 years old, although it is starting to change as the growing demographic of people over 60 is being capitalised upon.

When we're aware of these cultural stories, we can make a conscious choice about which story will run in the back of our own mind.

Story 1: The Time of Dormance



Key storyline:

As we age, expect a decline in all that is abundant and joyous including our personal attributes; ageing is a downward slope leading to scarcity, being needy, dependent, and vulnerable. It's downhill all the way from here, baby.

Here is the story plot: as people age, they decline in every way, in health, capability, and physical and psychological presence. They become prone to ageing diseases that can strike physically, mentally, and emotionally. Older people deteriorate to lack initiative, imagination, memory, awareness and come to a state of being unreliable, dependent, unproductive, unsociable, or impossibly needy. Old age is regarded like a disease and old people a burden. Along with the frustrations and anxieties of caregivers, they may see those in their care to be tolerated or without purpose but lovable. When old and frail, they can be seen like children or as too painful or too hard to look at and be with, and so are avoided and left to be alone. It is a primal avoidance, looking away from something too painful to deal with.

All this pretty well describes the existential fears held by older people themselves (see "Who Will You Be as an Elder?"). These fears become compounded due to the way older people are treated by the prevalence of Story 1 running in the background of the social norms and personal attitudes. It can be shocking to find that you are being treated as old, even though you are only fifty, or sixty, or seventy or you name it. It is certainly a common experience of many seeking employment.

Ageing is generally feared and consequently held off for as long as possible. Younger people don't believe ageing could happen to them—I know I didn't or thought it was so far off it wasn't worth thinking about—and if they do believe it, have concocted solutions to avoid it altogether like, "I'd O.D. on my drug of choice and go out enjoying myself".

Story 1 regards older age as the Time of Dormancy, the bleak winter of our life where nothing grows and there is nothing to look forward to.

Story 2: The Time of Harvest



Key storyline:

As we age, expect an acceleration in joy, fulfillment and all that is abundant as we focus on what really matters and our attributes; it's an upward slope from here to our calling and contributing our most humble and valuable gifts to others.

In contrast to Story 1, Story 2 is uplifting. Older people are our respected and valued Elders. They can be trusted implicitly with caring for our wellbeing. We can tell them our secrets and dilemmas as well as have total confidence in giving them our children to mind. As people age, they become more discerning, magnanimous, forgiving, understanding, and perceptive.

Older people have time for reflection and contemplation. Those that think deeply about their life experiences and what really matters, start to become wise. They can be trusted to see and speak their truth, having the interests of the whole family or community at heart.

Story 2 recognises that youth and adults cannot experience being older; but older people have experienced being younger and have already encountered the previous life stages. Wisdom needs age – a bold statement at the risk of over-simplifying it because wisdom is not an automatic function of age. Additional ingredients and effort are needed.

This story is a powerful one of ageing, about on-going growth, learning and human potential; it uplifts the spirit and feeds the soul.

As we age, expect an acceleration in joy, fulfillment and all that is abundant as we focus on what really matters and our attributes; it's an upward slope from here to our calling and contributing our most humble and valuable gifts to others.

Story 2 sees older age as the time of harvest. It is life's autumn where the fruits of our lives are abundant and shared with the community. We will all become old if we're lucky enough to live that long.

And then there's Story 3 . . .

The Time of being Invisible



Key storyline:

Remember this: Be seen and not heard. You're just a child and your voice is of no consequence or real value.

This is more a personal and inner story. Many of us in western society who are now over 65 years old, were born into a time where kids were told--indeed taught--to be seen and not heard. This was part of a social norm of bringing up children and the inherent message to the child was your voice was not worthy or not wanted, that is, you did not really matter. We were tolerated if we shut up and that made us pretty-well invisible or like servants or rebels. The story can run on in the subconscious throughout life, echoing that false belief about the self.

The story of Invisibility plus Story 1 of Dormance, are compounded in their effect by ongoing media and news about the jobless over-50's, ageing diseases, elder abuse, the loneliness and isolation of older people, their general victimhood, and added Covid vulnerability.

Where are the media stories of fulfilled, self-determining elders? Where are the examples of the valuable resource Australia has in its ageing population?

The other powerful dynamic in operation here is the Pygmalion Effect. Briefly, this is based on research findings by Rosenthal and Jacobson showing that high expectations by others especially authority figures, lead to better performance while low expectations lead to poorer performance. Thus, when negative stories are repeated, people start to believe the message and accompanying expectations, then act in the ways being described.

Alternative stories of ageing and actions are needed of hope and kindness, that hold the possibility for those ageing to benefit the whole community, showing that older people matter, they are of value, they can contribute as they age, and more than that are integral to a healthy community.

Can we make a difference? Yes we can. Ask yourself: Which story do I have running in the back of my mind? Who does it serve? Do I have different stories for different people or different situations? We all participate to a lesser or greater extent in wounding or healing the communities we live in.

Sometimes, when we are at our most vulnerable and in touch with our soul, we realise anew how much each person and community mean to us – communities of family, work, neighbourhood, and friends. Unless they die prematurely, all these adults and children will age and grow old. Very old.

Picture that for a moment. What kind of community do you want for them? For yourself? Our attitudes and words have power, and we can make a difference, depending on what story of ageing is running in the back of our mind.

Which story will you actively choose to run?

These ideas were presented in a talk on Ageism at the Gathering of Kindness conducted by the Hush Foundation in Melbourne, 2019.

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