

Old People

Category: Aging

written by Joan Greland-Goldstein | February 2, 2020

I grew up hating old people. As a young child, I was engulfed in a sea of gray hair and wrinkles and had no playmates. Mama was forty-one when I was born; Daddy was forty-five. My siblings and cousins were older than me by at least eleven years. None of our neighbors had children. The people we visited were all in my parents' age group or older.

My dislike for and discomfort with being around old people continued into adulthood. I was definitely an ageist. As punishment for that bad karma, most of my patients in nursing school were old women with impacted bowels. That's why I chose to work in the nursery when I got my first job.

When I started at Kaiser, though, my ageism slowly transformed into admiration and respect for the retiree volunteers who staffed the Health Education Center.

This was a group of vibrant, healthy senior citizens fully engaged in the world around them. They served as wonderful role models for how to age successfully and continue to have a meaningful life, regardless of the number of birthdays they'd celebrated.

Judith, a former school counselor, taught me to use all the skills I had gained through my working years to remain a contributing member of society after retirement.

Susan had activities planned for every morning and every afternoon of the week. Because of her influence, I created an active schedule of exercising, volunteering and seeing friends after I retired.

Jean and Tom were world travelers, going on several vacations a year and telling me about their adventures when they returned. Having limited time to travel while I was working, I was encouraged to see that it was never too late to visit the places you'd always wanted to see.

Another volunteer, Sam, always appeared for work in a jacket and tie because he felt he should present a professional image to the public. I honored him every time I passed up my jeans and T-shirt and put on work clothes for my hospice volunteer job.

Every year while I worked with these volunteers, I feted them with daffodils from the American Cancer Society's Daffodil Days. Now I think of them all with great fondness whenever I see daffodils, and I silently thank them for showing me a completely different picture of "old people."

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