

The Third Age

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A few days before Christmas a colleague sent me an unsolicited email cartoon with the note: "This should cheer you up!" The single frame showed a bent-over, sunken-chested, balding man in his seventies as a doctor examined him with a stethoscope. The caption said, "Remember those twenty extra years I told you you'd have if you followed a healthy life style? Well, now you're living them."

Having recently been turned down by the search committee at a New England university because of age, I was less than amused by the cartoon. I felt it was all too typical of the kind of treatment of my contemporaries that I've seen in the U.S. and the reason I am currently working abroad.

I told my colleague that I intended to write, not for AARP or other publications catering to the over-sixty market, but for general consumption, an article that would spell out in clear terms the advantages to what Europeans, Asians and Latin Americans terms la Tercera Edad or the Third Age. The epithet is appropriate as you shall see.

The First Age (0-30) is one of gradually diminishing dependence. The child, then teenager, then entry-level employee draws on the resources of the family, the community, the school system and the university for 22 years or so. Then, for the next eight, with an entry level in a corporate or academic setting, the young person is in tutelage to more experienced co-workers.

The Second Age (30-60) is characterized by careerism, experiential gains, building of family and financial base, climbing the corporate or academic ladder, modifying the personality and trimming one's individual uniqueness to fit the pattern of the chosen field of endeavor.

Neither of these ages is conducive to altruism (few resources), mentoring (limited experience and fear of competition), selflessness (imperatives of family needs and responsibilities) cooperation or charity (competitive demands to build a pecuniary base and provide security). Moreover, the pressure of the marketplace, the financial insecurity, the need to fit in as a part of a team while at the same time standing out as a leader, means that the individual had little time for reflection, little incentive for taking the high moral ground, little desire to share what he or she knows with colleagues working for the same promotions, and must spend enormous amounts of energy simply covering his or her derriere. Recent revelations from Congress, from international boardrooms and other areas of public and corporate power show that this is true for even the highest echelons of leadership.

In the Third Age, however, we have achieved our central ambitions or have come to terms with the limits which life and its possibilities have circumscribed. We have achieved a level of trust in our decision-making and our judgments, learned from our mistakes, garnered the respect of colleagues by the quality of work completed, and have some financial security. We have also come to terms with the raw, factual, limited term of our existence on the planet and want to leave behind a legacy that is something more than a solecism, something greater than our own ego.

These are truisms widely acknowledged in Asia and Latin America, and to some extent in Europe. Those in the Third Age in most societies are respected because of these factors and granted a measure of social dignity not seen in the U.S. Not only are they the repositories of the culture and the history of the nation, they are the archival memories of the family, those most advanced in spiritual development, those who have had the experiences, pains, losses and time to understand sorrow, weariness, failure, the futility of

egotism, of war, of blind consumerism, and the inevitability of death.

In the United States, a young nation of less than three hundred years (a pre-adolescent compared with the thousands of years of most noteworthy civilizations), there exists a pathology of youth-love which runs the gamut from the prurient eroticization of minors (think Britney Spears and her school-girl costumes—who was all that for?) to a preoccupation with everlasting health and beauty as seen in the 280 billion dollar industry in plastic surgeries and cosmetics. It is no irony that the society is in a constant uproar over pedophilia. It reflects quite clearly the logical consequence of the eroticization of youth and the communal need to project the consequences on others.

In no other society is the affinity of the young and the aged discouraged. Quite the contrary; in most cultures intergenerational companionship and mentoring are commonplace. In no other society is the kindly uncle or grandfather seen as a potential threat to the welfare of the child. In no other society are teachers discouraged by law from an affectionate or encouraging hug of their students. In no other society is the profession of education so lacking in communal respect, or the elderly treated with such lack of deference, whether masked as amused tolerance, indifference or bemused contempt.

A society which glorifies youth and denigrates age is most unnatural. It completely reverses which we know of organic development, progress of human life, and the natural order of things. By enshrining youth as the goal of most its citizens, American society has in fact chosen arrested development as a societal goal. Preoccupation with fun, with egotistical concerns, with “Wild On” vacations, with one’s ambitions, with one’s appearance, with one’s hair or nails, skin condition or breasts, muscles or erectile tissue, are concerns of an adolescent not of a mature woman or man. Yet these superficial concerns drive the entire society. Everyone has a claim to them, a niche magazine devoted to them, products which cater to them, and medications, operations and corporate entities which specialize in these shallow and temporary cosmetologies and diversions.

The result is stupefying. It is a wonder that there is any spiritual development at all. It is a wonder that mentoring and altruism still exist in the U.S. They do, but they are slowly being eroded, not from lack of Third Age candidates to provide them, but for lack of recipients to honor the gifts—due to a societal mind-set which depreciates them. One advantage of being in the Third Age, of course, is the knowledge of how to reach beyond one’s own society when it is unreceptive. Jimmy Carter’s work in Latin America comes to mind, and the respect and honor he receives abroad. However, with so much of our work being outsourced these days, it would be a shame to see the best and brightest of the Third Age leaving the U.S. to work abroad where their contributions will be appreciated, their experience valued, and their age respected. We should try to find ways to keep a few of the good ones at home.

The thing we sometimes forget about youth is that besides being a time of hope and potential, it is also a scary time, directionless and puzzling. If there are no elders to lead, to teach, to impart the history and experience of the nation, then the future will be as amorphous and meaningless as the present: uninformed and without the illumination of the past. The Third Age is what keeps a society honest, what keeps it focused, reminding us as did Longfellow, that “Life is real, life is earnest, and the grave it’s not its goal.” Because it is, of course, that fear of death which is the dark side of the American youth-centered culture. By refusing to acknowledge the ending of life (except as a romantic notion of a young hero killed in combat or a Camelot noble fallen in Dallas) Americans either negate or minimize the experiential value of those of the Third Age. We’ve thrown the baby out with the bath water. Afraid to see death as a part of life, we diminish life by insisting that it run backwards, and the least dignified among us run to the plastic surgeon or for the prescription of Cialis.

When I was an emerging adolescent and sent out to my first job at the age of fourteen, I remember my father giving me instructions on how I should behave on the landscaping crew. But it was my grandfather who told me when I came home late one afternoon, tired and sweaty and complaining about my job, “Act your age!” It is good advice to all of us in our Third Age. My grandfather is an indelible part of my memory. He gave me the stories of the family, the history of Ireland, the origins of my race. But, most importantly, he gave me the understanding that there was a season and a place for each of us in the

developmental process we call life. He respected his age, and he reminded me to respect mine—both then and now.