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Growing old is hard to do

In an extremely self-conscious age, when we measure our words with careful precision, there is a group of people who are slandered, put down and treated with disrespect by a disturbing number of Americans.

People who have never uttered the “n-word,” who are respectful of all women and have never made a disparaging remark about Latinos, Asians and Native Americans will very casually treat this group of people with callousness and disregard.

Ageism is the last prejudice we allow to be expressed unchallenged in public, and no one seems to care. I have heard outrageous and downright mean things said about senior citizens that my contemporaries chuckle at. I feel dread when I hear some of the awful things that are said about older Americans.

As Manager of the Health Insurance Counseling and Advocacy Program, a program administered by the California Department of Aging, I worked very closely with elderly people for six years. My job was to train volunteers, all of whom were past the age of 65, in complex Medicare and related health insurance issues. The twenty-four hour training was followed by a ten-page written exam and an oral exam.

Even though the volunteers were not being paid, they were very serious students who often surprised me with their ability to absorb information that left twenty-something staff trainees at a loss.

The longer I worked with seniors, the more perplexing I found the attitude held by my fellow baby boomers, and younger people, toward their elders.

Is the generation who trusted no one over 30 in the '60's now ridiculing anyone over the age of 60 in the '90's? Is this the legacy of disrespect of an ungrateful generation?

I feel embarrassed when I think of my fellow boomers, in the throes of aging themselves, tossing aside the men and women who survived the Great Depression,

fought in World War II, and raised the best fed, best educated, and most spoiled generation in the history of the United States.

I find the issues of aging to be of vital interest to all Americans. Yet when I told people what I did for a living, I was invariably greeted by a yawn. No one wants to think about the issues of aging and, in a youth-worshipping society, people ignore them.

As I recall the thousands of hours I spent in the company of elderly Americans, I am left with a feeling of pride, respect and even reverence. Their wisdom, their compassion and, yes, their grouchiness taught me a great deal about survival.

They should be our role models. Yet we put ourselves on a weight-loss program, color our hair, buy bifocals without lines and chase after an unattainable youthful ideal based solely on physical characteristics.

On a recent rip to a bookstore to pick up some summer reading I surveyed the autobiography section. I was disheartened to see books written by people in their thirties. I shudder to think of the loss this generation will eventually feel when they realize the great treasure they tossed aside in favor of reading about how a television actress dealt with the terrible dilemma of her series being cancelled.

I know there was a time when our nation's elders were treated with respect and were allowed to live in dignity. That time has passed. We now live in a culture that disposes of things as well as people. The values held by a hard-working generation of people who worked together to raise their families, paid their taxes, and then retired, are now held in low regard.

The next time you hear someone joke about an old geezer, stop and consider the source of the humor. If you find yourself listening to an old person who is repeating himself, try to hear what new thing he is saying. When you feel impatient at the slowness of an elderly person who is ahead of you in line, think of the miles he has traveled.

Although conversing with an elderly person is not as entertaining as television, it may be ultimately more rewarding, for both of you.