

The Problems of Old Age

POINTS TO DEVELOP

Old age is seen as unavoidable and undesirable.

Compared to the past, old age is now perceived with greater fear.

Why fear old age? - diminishing sense of importance; feeling of redundancy; loneliness and neglect; reduced physical and mental resilience.

Modern society forces an old person to live like an island- often facing the loss of a spouse and old friends.

There is little to look forward to in a changing world to which one cannot adapt.

Ill health and thoughts of death disturb peace of mind.

Financial constraints can be worrisome, even overwhelming.

Old age could be one's best years, but problems cast long shadows.

It's funny how everyone wants to live long but no one wants to grow old. Old age is viewed as an unavoidable, undesirable, problem-ridden phase of life that we all are compelled to live, marking time until our final exit from life itself.

Perceiving old age with fear is actually a rather recent phenomenon. This fear seems to increase as each day passes and the world becomes more complex and less comprehensible. Earlier, when life was simpler and values counted for more, those who reached a ripe old age held an enviable place in society where they could really relax and enjoy their twilight years, secure in the knowledge that they still they were well past their prime, all that they had given their best for was still important- and so were they.

It is when one loses this sense of importance whether in one's own eyes or in the eyes of others- that life becomes a problem. And it is this diminishing sense of importance whatever the reason – that plays havoc with the lives of the elderly. Because, if we analyze it , as long as one is valued and feels wanted, no problem appears too difficult to grapple with.

When one enters the final room of life called old age, there lurks a terrible feeling of redundancy in every corner of that room. This begins right from the time when one must retire from productive service at a not-so-old age, and when the next generation grows up, moves away. Emerges from gestation. There is , no doubt, a sadness mixed with regret in handing over the baton, the keys, the

chair wherever, to the next-in-line, but it is also a sadness mixed with pride in watching a worthy successor take over, knowing that the show will go on. It is not this that hurts but the fact that from now on the world views one in the same way as it does an ageing horse put out to graze.

It is unfortunate but whenever we think of old age, what automatically come to mind are visions of loneliness and neglect. And if we add to these failing health and illness, the picture takes on darker hues of helpless despair. Although it is true that at no stage of life is it ever smooth sailing and every stage has its own attendant problems, those of old age seem insurmountable because the physical ability and mental resilience to cope with adverse situations are vastly reduced. And, to top it all, if there is no one else around even remotely interested in whether the problem at hand merits a solution, the fight becomes that much harder.

Throughout one's adult years one is busy thinking of others, caring for others, working for others, earning for others, whether or not one marries, has children, lives in a family- one lives amongst people. But after years of it one suddenly faces days of isolation and little to do. Now, solitude may be a good place to visit but it is not such a good place to stay in. Although no one is an island, modern society, more often than not, forces the old person to live like one, and although Simon and Garfunkel tell us that islands never cry, human islands do. Sometimes, one is lucky to have one's closest companion in life (which a spouse has become by this time) helping one to believe "grow old with me/the best is yet to be" as Browning seemed to believe. Sometimes, one is not quite so lucky and then the days are longer and emptier.

While journeying through life, one has to make endless adjustments with many unexpected, perplexing, difficult situations. In childhood and youth, one has other adults around to guide the way. As adults, the feeling that one is in charge helps in tackling such situations. But the elderly have no one to guide and at every step of the way they are made to realize that they most definitely are not in charge – so where do they go from there? The problem gets accentuated as the world ceases to have any resemblance to what the elderly were once accustomed to and changes at a bewildering pace with each passing day.

To make things worse, old age also means an old and failing body which will simply not cooperate, and let's on down ever so often. Even if one does not become sans eyes, sans teeth, sans everything right away, one does begin to slow down physically. Having rendered service for a lifetime, the organs and senses seem to stutter, gap, choke and wheeze before finally calling it a day. Minor ailments and major diseases rear their heads, and waking hours are

preoccupied with symptoms and pills, diets and therapies. A failing memory makes it difficult to take those vital pills on time. Visits to the doctor become routine as, for the first time, even for those who had been conscientious all along. Health and thoughts of impending mortality assume paramount importance.

Illnesses must be diagnosed and treated with the help of doctors, treatments, tests and therapies – and then the bills come pouring in, and the financial burden becomes yet another problem old age. No matter how large the nest egg one has carefully managed to put by, the sum remains constant while expenses mount. It is not just medical bills but sky-rocketing prices of just about everything one requires. In the ensuing struggle to balance the books, many familiar trappings of life to which one had become accustomed, have to go- and this brings more despondency. Added to this is the depressing anxiety of not knowing just how far ahead one must plan or for how long one must make the money last.

From the picture that comes to light it would appear that Anthony Powell was not very far off the mark when he wrote, “Growing old is like being increasingly penalized for a crime you haven’t committed.” This is a grim reality though the contrary should have been true. The twilight years ought to have been the best years of person’s life; freed from the responsibility of having to make a living one finally has all the time to actually live- “sit in shade/reliving the good old times/ letting bad memories fade.” In a few cases, that too is true. And that is array of hope.