

Worthy Lives

I wrote the list below, "Reasons Not to Dismiss Older People's Lives As Worthless and Useless", in a tongue-in-cheek manner; but it was inspired by the contempt and disrespect that some younger women show to older women here in prison. I myself as a youth held such contempt, thinking that with their frailties the elderly were a burden upon society, with little to live for anyway. I was repulsed by their graying thinning hair and veiny, wrinkled skin, even remarking such to my beloved grandmother. She just good-naturedly advised me that if I were so fortunate to live that long, I, too, would age like that someday, so I needed to accept it. Now, as I look at my veiny, weak, and wrinkled limbs, I do accept it as part of life which I very much want to live as long and as best I can, despite life's adversities and things I don't like. Life is not free of troubles for anyone; God knows I need to make less of them for myself and others. But I can gain insights and tolerance for others from my experiences of troubles.

Not all younger women are mean or disrespectful to older women. I have benefited many times here from the kind words and helpful hands of younger women who have volunteered to haul my heavy load of property to a dorm or my footlocker up the stairs. Many African-American women address me as Miss Beverly, having been raised to respect their elders in that way. I have heard work-release offenders speak fondly of their nursing home patients and of diligently attending to their needs with a caring personal interest.

In my list below, I am paying tribute to the care, moral values, love, and faith that my elders gave to me and which continue to help me to this day. Both of my grandmothers lived capably into their nineties in their own homes, so welcoming me there. Grandma Arthur made the best ever chocolate chip cookies and fried mush; listened intently to me in our long talks; and led an active social life of her own. Oh, the memories we have of our elders, whom we wouldn't want harmed. We should be proud of ways in which we helped them and enriched their lives, too.

The advantage of aging is that by the time you are elderly, you have probably learned enough to live better emotionally and spiritually. But many older people are still going strong mentally and physically, too. My ninety year old father still runs a business; recently wrote a memoir about surviving combat in WWII; and rides his Kawasaki motorcycle. The actress, Helen Mirren, at age 66, was voted "most beautiful woman" in an opinion poll last year (and in my opinion, the actor, Sean Connery, still exudes virile sex appeal). Jack Lalanne led others into physical fitness and health in his long career. Elders of excellence like Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, Jacques Cousteau, Robert Frost, and Maya Angelou contributed to their fields of knowledge well into their later years. Thank God, for the humanitarian work of Bishop Tutu and Nelson Mandela (who survived a long, political imprisonment), and that Mother Theresa lived as long as she did caring for the destitute, allowing them to die in dignity and peace. How many of our own elders are patiently visiting and supporting us in our incarcerations, some even raising their grandchildren and working hard.

Sadly, the elderly are often victimized by those who prey upon the weaknesses of others. Such predators live by the law of the jungle, depending upon power, cunning, and physical strength (saying, "no one could do that to me, lest I'd beat them up"), rather than upon their strength of character and integrity. But we depend upon each others' integrity like the shared air that we breathe. When we need morals, laws and human rights to protect us, they won't be there in a society that we have helped to corrupt. The protection of God may not even be there if the goodness of God isn't in the hearts of the people who are all around and over us, for God acts through us when we choose right over wrongful self-interests and abuses of power. How many times have you heard people say, "I just want to be treated like a human being", after being mistreated or praising staff for "respecting me as a human being"? Shouldn't we in turn honor all human lives as worthy, be it the young and the old; the fit and the disabled; people of all races and stations in life; and even those we have judged to be "good" or "bad"; in order to protect humanity, including our own?

By Beverly Jaynes, age 67

Reasons Not to Dismiss Older People's Lives As Worthless and Useless

- Older people remember your birthdays and tell you what an adorable baby you were.
- Older people remember you as a beautiful bride, while you are now crying on their shoulders about the betrayals and divorce.
- Older people are the ones you go to when the bank won't give you a loan.
- Older people can tell the difference between right from wrong; truth from lies; and reality from reality T.V. shows.
- Older people can scold abusers, bullies, criminals, and even politicians into being ashamed.
- Older people don't shy away from looking you straight in the eyes and warmly embracing you, at the least opportunity.
- Older people don't just microwave packaged foods, they bake those cookies, cakes, breads, and pies you like from scratch.
- Older people have mastered the art of conversation (preferring that to texting in abbreviations).
- Older people appreciate the finer things in life like Sunday dinners at the dining room table and naps by the fireplace in the afghan covered recliner.
- Older people still enjoy exchanging caresses and soulful looks with their lovers (they aren't dead yet).
- Older people choose wisely their battles, so don't even think about abolishing social security and medicare.
- Older people honor their duties and rights: to vote, to buy goods made in the USA, but cheaper medicines in Canada; and to impart their hard-earned wisdom in advice to you.
- Older people will patiently listen at length to the adolescent angst of their grandchildren; to health concerns of family and friends; and to T.V. evangelists and other sales pitches.
- Older people have helped to preserve the lost art of handwritten correspondence.
- Older people reserve their strength to get out to church, to the bank, cafeterias, senior centers, Walmart, the American Legion Veterans Hall, and to the bingo hall.
- Older people consider: obscenities to be obscene; immoralities to be immoral; and that conspiracies by more than one killer were involved in the assassinations of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King (older people are not easily fooled).
- Older people will love you through so many of your troubles and pray for you, when you're not so loveable.

By Beverly Jaynes, May 8, 2012