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The Imaginal Lexicon of Aging Studies

by

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The Imaginal Lexicon of Aging Studies

Introduction

Aging studies focuses on the cultural, humanistic and experiential dimensions of aging insofar as these are already embedded in literature, art, language and everyday life. The lexicon of the multi-disciplinary field has evolved in response to demographic trends, religious and social values, public policies, medical advances, economic contingencies, and other factors. At the same time, many age-related words have links to poetic imagery dating back centuries, and to evocative etymologies that conjure an historical context. New phrases and theoretical constructs have been coined, then differently interpreted decades later, and sometimes discarded as outdated or offensive. What it means to grow older is historically contingent and socially constructed. Analyzing the progression of word usage in gerontology and geriatrics provides a window into their shared cultural history. The following article integrates the disciplines of literary criticism, history and art history, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, disability studies, narrative medicine, journalism and memoir to expand and enrich the inquiry.

What We Call Older People

Journalist Joe Pinsker asked the question: “when does someone become old?” In his interviews he found that it is “surprisingly hard to find a good term for people in late life.” Today, “older person” is preferred in most public discourse, and in academic writing and professional conversations. However, since “older” is comparative, it begs the question, “older” than whom? The term serves as a safe if imperfect alternative to words that through acculturation have come to be associated with debility or decline (Pinsker, 2020).

Geriatrician Louise Aronson related a story of a medical professor who each year asked his students to write down the first words that came to mind when he called someone “old.” Then he asked them to do the same thing when he called someone “elder.” Associations to the word “old” included: wrinkled, bent over, slow moving, bald, white hair, weak, fragile, feeble, frail, stubborn, lonely and sick. Connotations to the word “elder” included: wise, respect, leader, experience, power, money, and knowledge (Aronson, 2019).

The philosopher Simone de Beauvoir observed that the revelation of one’s age comes from others- from outside, that it came as a shock the first time she was referred to as “old.” Calling a person “old” is considered pejorative; it “rings like an insult,” she said (de Beauvoir,1996). But being older is also an achievement. Many people take pride in the old label, feeling they have lasted long enough to earn the distinction. The psychologist James Hillman argued that old age is an “archetypal state of being” (Hillman 1999). The word “old” itself is neither belittling nor honorific. It comes from Old English “eald,” meaning “of ancient origin,” “nourished,” and can be traced back to Beowulf, written around 725, in which Hrothgar, the legendary king, is referred to as “old and gray-haired.” Indeed, the word “old” is thought to be among the oldest words in the English language.

The words “old” and “elder” have a common origin in Old English. A difference in their usage is that “elder” only applies to persons, whereas “old” can reference objects (a creaky old house), animals (teach an old dog new tricks), relationships between people (dear old friends), concepts (old-fashioned ideas), behaviors (old habits die hard). Based on early translations of the New Testament, the word “elder” became widely used to refer to “Church Elders,” as shepherds of a congregation. Also, in art history there are examples of commissioned “elderly gentlemen” portraits. El Greco’s painting “An Elderly Gentleman” (1587-1600) portrays a well-dressed nobleman. Vincenzo Foppa’s “Portrait of an Elderly Gentleman” (1495-1500) is a rendering of a Milanese aristocrat. Traditionally “elderly gentleman” conveyed a sense of dignity, respect, wealth.

Wise and respected leaders in many indigenous communities are called “Elders.” They pass on knowledge of ancient traditions and give advice on issues affecting their people. A related term “mentoring” refers to a wide range of supportive relationships between an older, more experienced person, and someone younger. It derives from Mentor, the “wise old man” in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Before he departed for Troy Odysseus asked his old friend Mentor to look after his adolescent son. In the story Mentor was inspired by the Goddess Athena who provided good advice, prudence, forethought. In his guise she appeared in moments of crisis, and at times when critical decisions had to be made.

In 1908 Elie Metchnikoff coined the term “gerontology” from the Greek word for old man, “geron.” He hoped that through the biological study of aging a “natural death,” free from disease, would become common. The term “geriatrics” was coined in 1909 by Ignatz Leo Nasser to refer to an emerging medical practice area that focuses on the diagnosis and treatment of diseases in old age. In Greek mythology the personification for old age is Geras, portrayed as a small, bent, emaciated, bald old man leaning on a thin crooked stick. A vase painting depicts the hero Hercules, wielding an enormous club, encountering and perhaps fighting with a frail Geras.

The words “senile,” and “senescence,” derive from the Latin “senex,” meaning “old man.” In the 19th century the word “senile” evolved from a general term for old age to a medical one. The term “senile dementia” was first described by the French physician Esquirol in 1838. He worked at Salpêtrière, a hospital in Paris that was expanded to include a poorhouse occupied by thousands of older women, most of whom had been begging on the streets. Although no longer used as a clinical term, the word “senile” still connotes pathology. In 1922, at age 77, G. Stanley Hall published *Senescence*, the first major psychology text by an American social scientist on aging. He termed the final stage of life “senectitude.” In the tradition of Jungian psychology, the “senex archetype” encompasses figures such as the “wise old man,” “melancholic Saturn,” or “ugly hag” that appear in dreams and fairy tales.

The number of years a person has lived is “chronological age.” The term comes from the Greek “kronos,” meaning time, and was associated with the oldest of the Greek gods Kronos. In the Renaissance the personification evolved into the figure of Father Time portrayed as a white-bearded old man holding an hourglass, a reminder that existence is temporal and finite (Panofsky, 1972). Whereas “chronological age” is based on years-since-birth, “prospective age” is based on “remaining life expectancy,” years-to death. A popular phrase is: “60 is the new 50.” It may be literally true. In Japan, 60-year-old women in 2014 had the same remaining life

expectancy as 50-year-old women in 1972. “Prospective age” is “chronological age” indexed to changes in life expectancy (Sanderson, et.al., 2019).

In 1821 the word “menopause” was coined and pathologized as a medical syndrome. In Western societies its advent became associated with the onset of old age in women. According to historian Susan Mattern, the concept of a menopausal syndrome is mostly absent from ancient medical texts (Mattern, 2019). Rather than being a medical condition menopause was viewed as a transition to a new phase of existence. In 1906 secretions from ovaries were shown to produce estrus in animals, and the word “estrogen” was created. Subsequently, menopause was reframed as a hormone deficiency. Its replenishment became popularized as a way of restoring youthful vigor and making women “feminine forever.”

A frightening, cantankerous old woman is a “crone.” The word came into the English language through Chaucer around 1390 as a term of abuse derived from an expression for an “old ewe.” It has been reclaimed by feminist scholars to mean a mature, powerful wise woman. In her 1976 essay *The Space Crone* Ursula LeGuin described the exalted status of experienced, post-menopausal women who have entered a stage of existence that no younger woman and no male can claim (LeGuin, 1997). The suffragette Elizabeth Cady Stanton is an example of a feminist crone, a productive post-menopausal political activist and social reformer. In 1857, after birthing her sixth child, she wrote to Susan B. Anthony that “we shall not be in our prime before fifty & after that we shall be good for twenty years at least” (Mundy, 2019). A tripartite division of the life stages of women, “maiden-mother-crone,” is cited especially in the feminist literature on aging.

Shakespeare’s play *King Lear* commences with an ill-conceived retirement ceremony. He seeks “to shake all cares and business” from his age. Lear’s fate was foretold in folk stories of the time that cautioned older men against the too early transfer of their property to children. Before too long they would be made to eat with the servants it was said (Thane, 2005). In modern times the transition from paid work to retirement was commonly viewed as the start of old age for men. In the 19th century complaints from men physically worn from years of labor in industrial jobs, and the miserable living conditions of many others no longer able to work, became a serious social and political problem. The spread of public and private pensions made the “pensioner” a new figure in the pantheon of older folk (Troyansky, 2016).

In his 1825 story, *The Superannuated Man*, Charles Lamb told of an office clerk who started at a private company at age 14, and when he reached 50 years, was “pensioned off.” To be “superannuated” was to be involuntarily retired on account of age, to be obsolete. Lamb’s character suddenly finds himself adrift, having derived his identity and purpose from his daily, if dull, work routine (Blythe, 1979). In 1889, Germany became the first nation to adopt a social insurance program for older people, democratizing retirement. Bismarck believed that guaranteeing financial security in retirement would lessen the chance of a working-class rebellion. Other Western European countries soon followed. However, those who received a pension from the state were soon lampooned in the popular press and derided by younger generations as burdens on society. Today, the term “old-age pensioner” is considered derogatory.

In 1935, the U.S. created Social Security, which paid “retirees” aged 65 and older a continuing income as an “entitlement.” The twenty-year increase in U.S. life expectancy since its enactment has changed the duration, economics, and meaning of retirement. Between the 1960’s through the mid 1990’s retirement age decreased, even as life expectancy increased. Since there has been a reversal and retirement age has been increasing. Economic necessity is one reason some older adults continue or return to work, full or part-time. They do not have an adequate income to retire or worry about outliving their financial resources. Others choose to remain active, sustain social connections, and experience the self-satisfaction they get from working. In 1998 the lobbying organization *AARP* officially changed its name to its acronym because an increasing percentage of its members still worked. The word “retiree” became outdated as a general term for older people.

The term “senior citizen” was conceived in 1938 to denote eligibility for pension benefits, and subsequently to refer to a wide array of “senior citizen discounts.” It was intended to convey a sense of respect for older members of the community, but the frequency of its use has decreased in recent decades. The term “eldercare” dates to the mid-1960’s, coincident with the enactment of Medicare, Medicaid, and the Older Americans Act. It refers to the provision of medical and social services to older people in a variety of settings. The mistreatment of older people, although occurring throughout history and across cultures, was termed “elder abuse” starting in the mid 1970’s. The term “frail elderly” was first defined in the geriatric literature in the mid 1980s. However, the word “elderly” has come to be viewed as stigmatizing because of its associations with frailty, illness, dependence, and vulnerability.

The meanings of words evolve over time. Linguists have identified patterns in these semantic changes including “pejoration,” association of a term with a negative meaning, and “amelioration,” association of a term with a positive meaning. Also, words may have both negative and positive connotations at the same time, which is the case in many age-related words. Shifts in cultural attitudes, social roles, and conceptual frameworks provide a context for language trends in aging studies and other fields. Another consideration is author guidelines for professional publications. Most journals in the aging studies field have adopted the recommendations of the *Reframing Aging Initiative* and banned the use of descriptors such as “seniors,” “elders,” and “the elderly” because in its estimation these now connote negative stereotypes (Reframing Aging Initiative, 2022).

The medicalization of aging starting in the 19th century included the creation of new clinical terms such as “senile dementia” and “menopause” resulting in their pejoration. An example of “amelioration” is the word “crone,” originally a term of abuse that was co-opted by feminist artists and scholars and re-imagined as the image of a powerful old wise woman. The example is instructive because it demonstrates that pejorative terms can be re-claimed and socially re-constructed.

Over the last century, the advent of publicly funded retirement systems in Western countries generated new terms- “pensioner,” “retiree,” and “senior citizen”- and pejoration soon followed. In popular culture the denigration may be linked to a loss of social status that is often associated with not being employed. In political and economic discourse retirement is sometimes seen as a transition from a role as a productive worker to one that is a burden on society. Demographers

cite the increasing ratio of the number of dependent adults to the number of working adults who support them.

Historically, and still today, “elder” connotes positive images of respect, dignity and wisdom. However, perjoration began with the introduction of terms such as “elder care,” “elder abuse,” and “frail elderly.” Legislation that greatly improved the quality of life of older adults was also a catalyst for negative perceptions. Perjoration occurred when the enactment of entitlement programs were met with concerns in the broader society about the sufficiency of economic resources and their equitable distribution.

The Language of Longevity

In the Bible the oldest man was Methuselah who lived 969 years. Adam lived for 930 years. Noah was 600 at the time of the Flood and lived another 350 years. The patriarchs were also long-lived. Abraham died at age 175, Issac at 180 years, and Jacob at 147 years. Whatever the interpretation of these incredible ages, in ancient Hebrew writing old age is associated with authority and deference. Advanced age was considered a God-given reward for living a virtuous life. Moses lived to be 120 years, at which time “his eye had not dimmed, and his vigor had not diminished.” Thus, the Jewish blessing “may you live to be 120 years” implies retaining one’s physical and mental health to the end.

In the collective imagination longevity is frequently connected to remote places, islands and mountains, real and imagined. The Greek Isles of the Blest is an example, but many cultures throughout history told stories of isolated lands, virtual paradises, where the inhabitants were rejuvenated by fountain of youth waters, special ambrosial foods, and magic elixirs. In the 1960’s the Soviet Union promoted hard to believe stories of supercentenarians among the Abkhasia people of the Caucasus region as a point of national pride. In the 1970’s a group of village elders in the mountain town of Vilcabamba, the Inca’s sacred region in Equador, gained notoriety with what turned out to be exaggerated claims of being over 120 years old. More recently places where people are said to live the longest and healthiest lives, such as the mountain region in Sardinia, are advertised as “blue zone” tourist destinations.

“Prolongevity” is the term for the human effort to extend the lifespan. Long-lived adepts of Taoism are represented as aged in appearance, gnarled, but benevolent, good-humored, wise, secretive, whimsical. They practiced a disciplined system of prolongevity techniques, a spiritual way of life, including “quietism,” avoiding strife and struggle associated with ambitions for wealth and worldly fame, restricted diet and physical exercises. Ancient physicians Galen and Avicenna taught that aging could be slowed through personal hygiene and healthy behaviors. Throughout the centuries and continuing today there is an extensive literature devoted to the prolongation of life by means of temperance in daily activities, special foods and dietary restrictions, exercise and sleep. Among the most influential treatises were those written by Luigi Cornaro between 1550-1562. Consistent with Aristotle’s theory he believed that the gradual loss of the body’s “innate heat” led to a gentle demise in senescence, and that his prescriptions could not only result in a long and healthy life, but also to the blessing of a disease-free, painless, “natural death” (Gruman, 2003, Cole 2006).

The word “survive” derives from Latin, meaning to “live beyond.” In legal terminology it refers to someone who outlives another, such as being eligible for “survivor benefits” through Social Security. Surviving has also come to mean living through a perilous event such as a war or holocaust, an epidemic, a life-threatening illness like cancer or other trauma. The term denotes a sense of strength, a will and ability to live longer, to last despite hardships. For Nobel laureate Elias Canetti, the psychology of survival is also associated with a sense of satisfaction that it is someone else who has died. Desiring to live a long life means wanting to outlast one’s contemporaries, to continue to stand and endure while others have fallen. Social prestige may come just from still being alive (Canetti, 1978).

Literary critic Emily Wilson explored the theme of “tragic overliving” in Western literature. The Latin word “survival” has the same root meaning as the word “overliving.” However, whereas “survival” has mostly heroic strength-based connotations, “overliving” has tragic ones. A mythic model for senescent overliving is Tithonus (Wilson, 2004). The Goddess Eos became enamored of the handsome king and begged Zeus to make him immortal. Tithonus was exempted from death, but she forgot to ask for eternal youth along with immortality, and over time he entered a state of extreme decrepitude. She continued to care for him in her palace, dressed him in beautiful garments, fed him nectar and ambrosia. But when he became withered and no longer able to move his limbs, she shut him up in a chamber from whence his moaning voice was incessantly heard. His was considered a fate worse than death, a cautionary horror story.

Oedipus and King Lear are profiles in mental and physical anguish. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, written when Sophocles was 88, Oedipus is homeless, blind, in rags, a social outcast. In Lear we find a tormented soul, the personification of aged pathos, homeless, naked, delirious, full of rage and sorrow. Both tragedies are riven by conflicts between the generations, for Oedipus with his sons, for Lear with his eldest daughters. When he was 90 years old Sophocles was sued by his sons on the charge that he was mentally incapable of managing his estate. He was acquitted after reading lines from his play, which was not performed in public until after his death. In the case of Lear, we have a dramatic new chapter in history of geriatric psychiatry. Lear is treated by a physician in accordance with Renaissance medicine. A “sleep cure” is administered, and music is played to restore harmony to the “untuned” King. His fragile recovery is a brief ray of hope before the final catastrophe.

A satirical representation of overliving is depicted in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* published in 1726. He described the “Struldbraggs” as people marked randomly at birth, who did not die, but continued to age. Since they never died eventually much of the population would consist of Struldbraggs. The mortal inhabitants of the land believed that if nothing was done the dotage of the immortals would bring the country to ruin. The literary solution was to strip them of all their resources, leave them penniless and homeless. Once they reached 80 years the Struldbraggs were considered legally dead. Their heirs claimed their estates, and only a pittance was allocated for their continuing support. In artistic renderings they are portrayed as grotesque, ghoulish beggars.

When she was 80 years, Penelope Lively, a British writer of fiction analogized death in old age to the ending of a novel. Narratives need an end to give meaning to a story. However, in the actual living of old age, “it is the search for an ending that is the problem” (Lively, 2013). The

end is not always obvious or expected. Witness Priam, the esteemed King of Troy, a venerable old man known in literary history for the extreme degradation and brutality of his death. His story is a reminder that the end of any life can go very badly. Priam's tragic fate has been much discussed by philosophers in their effort to define the meaning of a long life that is also a happy life. His trajectory from good to bad fortune presages Solon's injunction: "Call no man happy until he is dead" (Small, 2010).

Most older people hope for a good death, with dignity, honor and grace. Yet many are shuttled back and forth between home, hospital, nursing home and ICU in the last few months and days of life. While there is always a final proximate cause of death, in old age it can seem as if failing organs and multi-morbidities are competing with one another to determine which one will deliver the fatal trauma. Most physicians practice in a heroic mode and fight age-related diseases to the end. But some medical interventions are ill-advised and only prolong suffering (Gawande, 2017). In human experience overliving might be imagined as extreme fragility, mental anguish, physical pain, inability to communicate, a wish to die. Physician writer Louise Aronson described "all-too-common worst-case scenarios" where those who are most vulnerable, who are controlled and totally dependent on others, and are unable to assert themselves or articulate their wants and needs, are reduced to screams, moans, and bites, and may end up sedated, restrained, ignored (Aronson, 2019).

In the U.S. the number of people with Alzheimer's disease is expected to increase from 6 million in 2021 to 12 million by 2050. Every historical period has its iconic diseases and in an era of mass longevity it is Alzheimer's. What many people fear most about the disease is the possibility of outliving their sense of self. Jaques' monologue in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is a terrifying depiction of tragic overliving. The "last scene of all...is second childishness and mere oblivion... sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything." Physician writer Oliver Sachs described Alzheimer's patients whose response to music was preserved. Music was used to call up personal memories and evoke an animated response. It elicited emotions even in patients who appeared vacant and calmed many who were agitated. They enjoyed listening to music, playing the piano, singing familiar songs from the past, harmonizing with others, moving in rhythm, dancing. These joyous, almost miraculous reactions brought them back to life. As Sachs observed, a person may be amnesic and no longer self-aware, but "one is never sans everything." A version of the old self may make an appearance, even if it disappears as the musical experience is forgotten a few moments after it ends. Whatever the degree of physical or mental diminishment a person's basic humanity can still be manifest (Sachs, 2008).

Living Successfully with Chronic Health Conditions

In 1987 John Rowe and Robert Kahn introduced a distinction between "usual" and "successful" aging, defining the latter as avoidance of disease and disability, maintaining cognitive and physical function, and social engagement. It has become a popular "positive aging" paradigm that counters characterizations of aging as an inevitable period of decline and loss. However, anthropologist Sarah Lamb referred to the "successful aging movement" as a "contemporary obsession" (Lamb, et. al., 2017). Its roots can be traced back to prolongevity hygienists, and through a proliferation of self-help books, media coverage and merchandizing it has become a global phenomenon. But it is based on a medical model that de-values older adults who are

living “successfully” with a disability, chronic illness, frailty or mental health problem. Also, its rhetoric often equates virtuous living with healthy aging.

In 1989, Peter Laslett introduced the notions of a Third Age and a Fourth Age. He envisioned the Third Age as life’s culmination, a period of happiness, personal achievement and fulfillment, beginning after retirement through the onset of disease and disability. Third Agers are lifelong learners who take classes for fun or self-improvement. They are world travelers, recreation enthusiasts, bucket listers. Some fend off illness and debility with exercise, diet, medications, vitamins, cosmetics, elective surgeries, to improve their health, self-esteem, and physical appearance. Images of old age as ugly, wrinkled and weak serve a purpose. These frightening representations can prompt a heroic response consisting of healthy behaviors and other “anti-aging” activities. In the Fourth Age individuals are more likely to be dependent and frail. The concept of “human frailty” evolved in the 20th century into a medicalized “geriatric syndrome.” Although there have been recent attempts to standardize its clinical use and measurement, the term “frail” is still most often used as a synonym for vulnerability, poor health and functional decline.

The *Reframing Aging Initiative*, endorsed by leading aging organizations, discourages the use of words such as “battle” or “fight” to describe aging experiences. The “fighting aging” metaphor has ancient origins. In Norse mythology the hero Thor wrestles Elli, the personification of old age as a wizened hag, and loses. In Greek mythology, Menelaus wrestles Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea, who continually changes shape to slip the hero’s grasp, hence the word “protean.” In 2017 the phrase “anti-aging” was banned by AARP and by Allure magazine. However, it is still in widespread use in the beauty and fitness industry, the medical field, and in geroscience research labs that seek to slow down the aging process through genetic, molecular and cellular interventions.

Unlike average life expectancy, the maximum lifespan, approximately 120 years, has not increased over the centuries. The term “healthspan” has been defined as that portion of life during which a person is “disease- and disability-free.” The use of the neologism has increased dramatically in the last fifteen years although there is no accepted measure for it. While progress has been made in identifying possible biomarkers, determining the onset of a disease is not an exact science. Nor is having a disability or requiring some assistance with “activities of daily living,” synonymous with being unwell. Nevertheless, aging remains a risk factor for chronic diseases such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and dementia, and for multi-morbidities. According to the National Institute on Aging, 85% of older adults has at least one chronic health condition, and 60% has at least two (NIA, 2022). Thus, living longer often means more years living with a disease or disability. Centenarians who have lived for decades with chronic health conditions have been labelled “survivors.”

In recognition that in an era of increased life expectancy, late life can frequently span over 35 years, from age 65 to over 100 years, gerontologists and geriatricians have delineated the following sub-stages: “young-old” individuals are 65 through 74 years; “old-old” individuals are 75 through 84 years; “oldest-old” individuals are 85 years or older. The needs, desires and narratives of those lasting year by year through these decades vary greatly based upon social

determinants, lifestyle choices, genetics and fate. The term “oldest-old” was coined in 1985 in recognition of this fastest growing segment of the population.

Over the course of a year, journalist John Leland conducted interviews with “oldest-old” individuals. What he found, despite their down days, was that they were living relatively happy lives, “some more habitually than others.” Several had selective memory, tending to recall the good times while forgetting the bad. One man who insisted that he wanted to die spent much of his time re-living memories of a happy life. Even in the face of dire circumstances Leland’s older folks were mostly stoical about their advanced age. Which is not to say that they did not also experience stays in the hospital, periods of depression, bursts of anger. Leland concluded that despite the many challenges, for the most part “oldest-old” individuals who have lost loved ones and suffered other traumas, and have age-related diseases, disabilities and mental health problems, live satisfying lives in the community. Making peace with one’s physical and cognitive limitations produces scenarios that highlight the blessings of living a long life (Leland, 2018).

Staying in one’s home is the preference of most older adults. Some will need a degree of assistance including with personal care, help with housekeeping, transportation, paying bills, preparing meals, etc. to “age in place.” The social services delivery system relies heavily on family caregivers, mostly spouses and children, many of whom themselves are age 65 or older. When asked for her secret for a good old age Louise Aronson said: “good genes, good luck, enough money, and one good kid, usually a daughter” (Aronson, 2019). Deference to one’s parents is a traditional Chinese value dating back 3,000 years. The ideogram for “filial piety” combines the characters for “old” which is on top, and “son” on the bottom, showing that the older person is supported by but also a burden to his children. The philosopher Confucius is credited with making it a moral tenet of Chinese society. Today, as China’s population ages, its tradition of “filial piety” is being tested, due in part to its one-child policy only recently relaxed. In the U.S. there is a five-year gender gap in longevity resulting in almost twice as many women as men among those 85 years and older. With longer life expectancies especially for women, it is becoming more commonplace for “young-old” daughters to care for their “oldest-old” mothers.

The “conflict of generations” paradigm, prevalent in Western literature and art, generates derogatory rhetoric directed toward members of both the older and younger generations. Ageism is discrimination against any group based on age, including youth, who are often unfairly maligned, including by older people. An alternative utopian vision is the “age-friendly” movement, an effort to make cities and small towns more livable for older people and others. The model supports the integration of health care and social services, with the active engagement of families and neighbors living in mixed age communities. A best practice in making communities more livable for older adults and people with disabilities is expanding the use of accommodating design standards. An “age-friendly” community is friendly to all residents. Older community dwellers are wise when they mentor their young neighbors. Younger residents are encouraged to visit their older neighbors. Models of indigenous and “age-friendly” communities, and intergenerational activities such as mentoring, generate positive imagery directed toward both respected older people and praiseworthy youth.

Conclusion

Analyzing the progression of its word usage provides a window into the cultural history of aging studies. The disciplinary lexicon includes key words with links to poetic images dating back centuries, and to etymologies that evoke an historical context. New phrases have been coined, then socially re-constructed, and sometimes discarded as outdated or ageist. Some once offensive words have been reclaimed. The protean language of the field demonstrates ongoing challenges in speaking and thinking about the phenomenon of aging. Disability studies scholars have identified ableist language and attitudes in popular paradigms in the discipline. Increasingly, physician writers are recounting stories of older people and their families as they navigate the health care and social services systems. Literary genres offer ways to better understand aging narratives. There is much, especially toward the very end of life, that remains ineffable, and literature, poetry, art, philosophy and religion can provide a measure of meaning. Everyday experiences as expressed through personal essays, memoir, and journalistic interviews expand and enrich the scope of inquiry into what human aging means.

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