

“Beauty in Aging” (January 27, 2012)

Clearly, we are a society obsessed with youth. We spend our lives trying to maintain a sense of youthfulness while denying the effects of age through surgery, extreme weight loss, our fashion choices or lifestyle choices. It is no wonder that our senior population is virtually invisible in the media, unless the product being sold is targeting that specific audience. There is a prevailing fear of age and all that comes with it. Understandably, aging is challenging. Our bodies don't perform the way they once did, mysterious symptoms appear, people we love die...and many fear the onset of dementia-losing the memories so precious to them. These are very real fears, but there are also many reasons why aging can be a rewarding process.

With the passage of time comes an inherent wisdom, power and earned respect that younger generations can't possibly hold. For these reasons, elders are revered in many societies and respected as power figures with the answers that many younger members seek. Unfortunately for our society, older members of the family are not typically revered in this way anymore, as many families spread out across our wide country, seeking their own independent path. This cultural pattern does not change the fact that our older generations have much to share, and much from which we must learn.

I have always appreciated Erik Erikson's developmental stages because they provide a clear picture of “where we should be” at various times in our lives. The developmental stage he describes for individuals aged 65 and over is that of “Ego Integrity vs. Despair.” It is during this time that an overview of one's life begins-with all the good and the bad that took place in it. If one feels that he/she has learned from the challenges in life and grown to a fulfilled, satisfied life, a sense of “ego integrity” develops. If, on the other hand, the individual becomes preoccupied with failures and has not been able to learn from mistakes, a general sense of despair develops. This can very quickly lead to a depressed state from which the individual feels like his/her life is over, with a feeling of being trapped by choices that have been made over a lifetime. However, with support and guidance, anyone can learn to re-evaluate past situations and gain new

perspective. With perspective comes growth and development. In Erikson's world, anyone can reach "ego integrity," with work. So, despite the unspoken assumptions that "aging is to be feared and avoided," it is possible to find yourself at the final chapters of your life in a very good place. Much like those "fine old kegs" that Frank Sinatra refers to in his song, "It Was A Very Good Year," old age can be a time to relish.

"It Was A Very Good Year"

(E. Drake) [Recorded April 22, 1965, Hollywood]

When I was seventeen it was a very good year
It was a very good year for small town girls and soft summer
nights

We'd hide from the lights on the village green

When I was seventeen

[brief instrumental]

When I was twenty-one it was a very good year
It was a very good year for city girls who lived up the stair
With all that perfumed hair and it came undone

When I was twenty-one

[brief instrumental]

Then I was thirty-five it was a very good year
It was a very good year for blue-blooded girls
Of independent means, we'd ride in limousines their chauffeurs
would drive

When I was thirty-five

[brief instrumental]

But now the days grow short, I'm in the autumn of the year
And now I think of my life as vintage wine from fine old kegs
From the brim to the dregs, and it poured sweet and clear

It was a very good year

[brief instrumental]

It was a mess of good years