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Ideas for Intergenerational Living

a series of articles devoted to promoting cooperation and exchange between the generations.

Article 14 (5/05)

This is the fourteenth in the “Ideas for Intergenerational Living” article series.
(The series is online at: <http://intergenerational.cas.psu.edu/Articles.html>.)

Media Portrayals of Aging – In Search of a Balanced Message

What does it mean to age? This is a classic question being asked more frequently and by more people. This is also one of the trickiest questions to answer, since there is no one way to experience the aging process, nor is there one set of meanings associated with aging and reaching old age.

We do know, however, that *how we view* the aging process affects how we spend our time, relate to others, and plan for the future as we grow older. Sources of influence on public perceptions about age and aging therefore deserve close scrutiny. In subtle and not-so-subtle ways, older adults tend to be presented in the media in less-than-flattering terms. We read about financial scams that target older adults, unmet needs for care and companionship, and stories of frailty and isolation. The undercurrent message: the aging process is one of physical and mental decline, and increased vulnerability.

Certainly there are some problems that are more likely to be encountered in old age, particularly when people adopt unhealthy lifestyles. But it is the responsibility of the media to present both sides of the aging “coin”: the unique assets and new possibilities as well as the limitations and challenges. Let’s have more stories that highlight such positives as the vast potential for personal growth, the capacity for deeper relationships with others, and new opportunities for civic engagement and societal contribution.

Several months ago, a story in a respected national newspaper focused on the Asian tsunami disaster of December 2004 that claimed over 200,000 lives, entitled “Overlooked Tsunami Victims: The Elderly.” After establishing that many older adults perished in this disaster (in some places, more than the number of children who died), the article proceeded to describe older adults’ vulnerabilities to such disasters, such as inability to react fast enough to the speed of the rushing water, limited strength to hold on against rushing water, and difficulties in competing with aggressive crowds to obtain post-disaster relief and shelter. To be fair, the article did note the case of a particularly resourceful older adult, who survived by sitting in a window frame placed diagonally to the ocean.

As to why he wrote this article, the author explained: “The assumption created by the media is that the greatest numbers of victims were children. This story is an attempt to balance that perspective.”

I question not the factual accuracy of the information, but rather the selective choice of information that is reported. When people hear disproportionately negative information about members of an easily distinguished group, there is a tendency to attribute the highlighted negative characteristics to all members of that group. In this case, the “older adults as victim” emphasis inadvertently reinforces stereotypical notions of older adults as passive and helpless.

Such messages are reinforced in television advertising. Just think back to some of the most memorable commercials that feature older adults: “Clap on! Clap off!” “Help! I’ve fallen and I can’t get up.” To counter stereotypical notions about older adults, the key is to expose people to messages that highlight multiple dimensions of older adulthood via stories that show older adults in positive roles.

In an almost eerie juxtaposition, the same national newspaper that carried the older adult “victims” of the tsunami story had a story written by a farmer extolling the intelligence and other virtues of an elderly cow. The story – entitled, “A Clever Cow of a Certain Age” – describes how a 20-year old cow figured out how to navigate special meetings with the farmer for grain and premium hay while younger cows seem content eating only orchard grass. The author wrote about her special trust for “the instincts and experience she brings to bear on her own behalf. They've served her well these past two decades.”

Now why can't we talk more about humans that way? In my view, dwelling on how older adults lack the mobility to outrun a tsunami clouds the more interesting and important story line – how the vast majority of older adults play crucial roles and persevere, day in and day out, in building family, community, and country.

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