

Taking a Fresh Look at Aging

By Abigail Trafford

Tuesday, March 21, 2006; HE04

ANAHEIM, CALIF. -- The image on the screen was devastating: an older couple in bed. He is sitting up and complaining: "I can't believe I ate the whole thing!" She has her back to him, as though an older woman's face is too hideous to show to the audience. "Where have I heard that before," she snaps, in this ad targeted to people of a certain age.

Next on the screen was a clip of an 81-year-old woman graduating with a master's degree; then a 75-year-old woman running a marathon.

What is the real image of aging? That was the question for the more than 3,000 attendees of the annual conference here of the National Council on the Aging and the American Society on Aging.

Is aging a dark period of decline and ridicule? Is it uncharted territory of growth and opportunity? People in the audience were given a hand mirror. What image did they see in the glass when they held it up to their face? With this exercise, conference organizers hoped to break down the wall between "them" and "us" -- between old people and the men and women who work on their behalf.

Like an old-fashioned consciousness-raising session, the opening program explored aging's image problem among those who are the leaders in the field of aging. To be sure, the reality of aging is diverse. Older people are vulnerable to illness and dementia and a host of losses; they are also healthier, better educated and richer than earlier generations of people over 65 with unprecedented opportunities for new life.

But in a society that fears aging, negative stereotypes prevail. That is true even among many who work in the aging field. Most people who provide services to older men and women see a population that is frail and dependent and sick. Until recently, studies of aging focused on residents in nursing homes.

"People in the field of aging are studying decline. They are studying people who have problems," explained Laura Carstensen, chair of the psychology department and director of the center on longevity and life span development at Stanford University. But that focus can distort what it is to grow old.


Carstensen told of telling a colleague about a study showing that people at older ages do better emotionally than youths or people in middle age. "This just doesn't sound right," Carstensen said her colleague responded. Well, how surprising is that response? Her colleague treats patients with depression. The challenge for many in the field of aging is to overcome this narrow, negative, medicalized view of the process of aging.

"The narrative that's created this view is the narrative of decline. The narrative says that to understand aging is to understand decline," said physician Bill Thomas, founder of the Eden Alternative, an effort to improve the environment of nursing homes. "In this culture, a person in decline has no status."

The opening session, titled "Images of Age in America: The Shape of Things to Come," explored how

Advertisement

IQ QUESTION:
Which does not belong in the group?



U₁ S₁ O₁
E₁ A₁

Tickle Your Brain [Click Here!](#)

deeply the narrative of decline has permeated the popular culture. In one clip, the Smothers Brothers were playing the guitar and singing "Those Were the Days." In a voice-over, they then explained they couldn't get on television today because they are too old. In another clip, an ad for a movie in which a man becomes a dog, the dog-man runs wild through the neighborhood, bumps into an older woman in a wheelchair and throws her up into a tree.

Ridicule. Discrimination. Invisibility -- these are all signs of ageism. Hollywood is steeped in the narrative of decline and shows little enthusiasm for change. Actress and former social worker Lupe Ontiveros put it this way: "The only time it's going to change is when Clint Eastwood decides to get a leading lady his age."

We can't wait that long. The nation faces a deadline with the swollen boomer generation slouching toward Medicare land. It's up to those in the aging field to take a lead in shaping a truer narrative of aging -- one that captures the promise along with the problems of growing old.

"We need to have a new myth, like 'The Odyssey.' We need an image of society enriched by growing numbers of old people," said Thomas, author of "What Are Old People For? How Elders Will Save the World."

Otherwise, the culture will hang on to stereotypes, the Smothers Brothers will never get on television, and people will laugh nervously when a woman in a wheelchair ends up in a tree.

Television news anchor Hugh Downs, 85, who moderated the panel on images of aging, was an optimist. As he said: "I want to live long enough so that when someone says about me, 'There is an old man,' I know it will be a compliment."

Comments: mytime@washpost.com.

© 2006 The Washington Post Company

Ads by Google

[Aging or Alzheimer's?](#)

You may be able to help someone who loses things, wanders, or forgets.

www.alzheimersconcern.com

[Baby Boomer Trends](#)

The Shifting Characteristics, Needs & Expectations Of The 50+ Consumer.

www.Deloitte.com/US

[Baby Boomer Challenges](#)

2005 White House Conference Harvard's Paul Hodge Warns

www.genpolicy.com