



Pauline and Sybil Shack

THE BEST IS YET TO BE?

CHALLENGING THE MYTHS ABOUT AGING

Sybil Shack

"Vieille" ne veut pas dire nécessairement "mauvaise" dit l'auteure, qui, à 73 ans, vit avec sa mère, âgée de 93 ans. Dans notre société nous faisons tout pour apparaître jeune, mais être mûre, c'est pouvoir s'accepter telle que l'on est : c'est en acceptant notre âge que nous gagnons le respect des autres. Les personnes âgées ne sont pas forcément conservatrices : en fait, la plupart se sont adaptées pendant leur vie à des changements et des innovations incroyables. Il est souvent dit que la société n'a plus les moyens de s'occuper des personnes âgées; l'auteure conclut que, au contraire, les personnes âgées sont une ressource économique importante. Si certaines personnes âgées sont victimes des fausses opinions de la société envers la vieillesse, la majorité d'entre elles se rend compte que, si elles valorisent l'âge au lieu de le dénier, leurs années à venir seront plus productives.

The bag ladies rummaging in the city's garbage and the platinum-haired widows who own their high-rise condominiums, the sprightly bus riders of eighty and their less happy sisters tied into wheelchairs, my mother who presides over our household at ninety-three and I at

seventy-three have this in common: we are female and old; we belong to the growing minority in Canada's population which is collectively known as its senior citizens, the elderly, the Golden Aged, all identifying titles given to us to avoid calling us what we are, old.

According to the banks we enter this state of less than grace at sixty, according to the federal government at sixty-five. Whatever the dread boundary, we are likely to remain members of the minority of the old for a greater length of time than we were anything else, longer than we were infants or teen-agers or young or even middle-aged. There are also going to be more of us as we continue to outlive the men and as science learns more about the control of the diseases that kill us off.

Unfortunately we are not always held in high esteem in a society which values youth above all else, except perhaps money. Attitudes have developed about us that are based on misunderstandings and misconceptions. These often have the tenacity and strength of myths and are believed with almost religious fervour.

From the worship of youth has risen the myth that "old" means "bad." Young people and old, male

and female, hold firmly to this belief. We go to extremes to avoid the appearance of being old and hence bad. We feel complimented, as the years creep up on us, to be told that we are young in spirit, or that we don't look our age, or that we are only as old as we feel, because obviously we are to be pitied if we look or feel old. So we dye our hair. We dress like our granddaughters. We lie about our age. I am afraid I startle well-meaning acquaintances when I respond to their compliments with "What's wrong with being old in spirit? What's wrong with enjoying the earned right to be old?" We've lived. We've accumulated experience, skills, knowledge, even wisdom. Why should we have to apologize for, make light of, our assets?

I have little patience with the nostalgia that recalls a past which never was, and so belittles the satisfactions of the present and the future. Old may sometimes be bad; but so is youth, and so was middle age. Surely part of our maturity is the ability to accept ourselves as we are, senior members of the human race, valuable and contributing people, without having to pretend to be what we are not — young. In accepting ourselves we gain the respect of others. After all, they too in time will be old

— that is, if they are lucky.

Acceptance by the rest of society means being considered as individuals, not being lumped together in a homogeneous mass, often only as objects of good works. We value our differences as individuals and our independence. Even when we are old and sick we have a right to make decisions for ourselves, to determine our way of life as long as we possibly can. We have a right to be treated without condescension in nursing homes and hospitals, in department stores and restaurants.

We also resent the label of small-c conservatism, of rigidity in our thinking, a label I find more often applicable these days to my very young friends. Never has a generation lived through more, greater, and more rapid change than the old people of the 1980s. During our lifetime history has been accelerated; changes that in the past might have taken hundreds of years have occurred within decades. We have seen the domination of the internal-combustion engine; we watched the first heavier-than-air flying machines take to the skies; we caught the first sounds off the air waves. We survived two world wars and the Depression of the 1930s. We have accommodated ourselves to sweeping changes in manners and morals. Indeed we, this century's old people, have proved the immense adaptability of the human race. We may be unrealistically nostalgic, but we can hardly be described as rigid.

One of the most dangerous misconceptions about us is that we are no longer affordable. Daily we read that we are becoming just too expensive, that the upcoming generation can no longer bear the cost of providing for us. We are made to feel guilty because the sick among us are depriving younger people of hospital beds and medical care; our pensions are draining the treasury; our housing is a problem for the local taxpayers. If we retire early, our pensions are too costly; if we stay on the job after sixty-five, we are contributing to the unemployment of the young.

Are we really no longer affordable? It is true that as we live longer more of us may require medical care. On

the other hand, the numbers who are totally dependent on the health-care system are few, relative to the whole population. Most of us probably require no more care than pregnant women, and far less than premature or handicapped babies. Paralleling the increasing needs of the old has been the vast improvement in the health of the young, with a correspondingly lesser demand on the health-care system. Immunization programs have wiped out the communicable diseases that until recently took their toll of children. Research is progressing — we pay part of the cost — to find cures for the crippling diseases that plague the middle-aged and the old. When it pays off there should be even more funds to be diverted to responsible caring for the helpless aged, those who now sit out their last years waiting for a welcome death.

We are not alone in suggesting that the way in which health care is now delivered needs re-evaluation. There must be more economical and more effective means of providing it. We know that we, the old, would benefit from an overhaul of a system which currently serves us expensively yet poorly.

Are we really not affordable?

Let it be remembered that throughout our working years we made a substantial contribution to the economy, whether we worked at home or in the labour force. We still pay taxes; and even the oldest, the sickest, the most frail, the poorest among us are consumers of goods and services, providers of jobs.

We create jobs *because* of our age. The sciences of geriatrics and gerontology are growing in importance as our numbers increase. A whole industry has developed around the care and handling of us. It employs people to study, counsel, house, feed, and care for us, to educate and re-educate us. Reporters, researchers, professors, social workers, clergy, counsellors, nurses, aides, administrators; cooks, launderers, cleaners — many of them would be out of jobs if it were not for us. Economists predict that the answer to unemployment lies in the service industries. We provide a base for many of them.

The day the Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement cheques are in the mail the banks pour out a steady stream of cash, which is immediately converted into consumer goods. The old have no need to save, and thousands must spend every penny we get just to stay alive. Any cutback on our pensions would be felt within days by local merchants and only a little later by wholesalers and manufacturers. Our numbers and our circumstances make us important consumers.

Moreover, the money from which our pensions are paid forms a large pool of capital, all of it available to Canadian enterprises, as are Canada Pension Plan funds to provincial governments. Much of this — annuities, pension and trust funds — is our money, accumulated as personal savings, as deferred salaries in employers' contributions to private and public pension funds, and as tax payments. It is an important economic resource.

So much for the myth that we are a financial burden, a dead weight for the young to carry. And suppose we were. If they deny us, what kind of responsibility will their children and grandchildren accept for them when today's young find themselves in the Golden Age?

Too often the old are perceived as a social as well as a financial problem. Living quarters are cramped; families are mobile; everyone is busy. There is no room and there is no time for elderly relatives, however close. They interfere with "normal" family life, are responsibilities added to an already crowded agenda.

As it happens, most of my generation cherish our independence as much as our relatives cherish their privacy. Given an adequate income and access to the care we may require in times of illness, we ask only to be allowed to continue our own interests, which might occasionally even include a little baby-sitting for our harassed younger relatives.

And we do have interests. In our thousands, women over sixty-five are sharing our expertise quietly and gladly. We work as volunteers in schools, nursing homes, and hospi-

tals. We teach French or English to immigrant women. We staff charity gift shops and volunteer libraries. We are conscientious members of boards of charitable organizations. We are active in churches, temples, and synagogues. We dish out food in soup kitchens, raise money for the United Way and the Red Cross and every worthy cause in the country. We serve our communities in a multitude of ways, often anonymously, seldom recognized for the unpaid work we do. Having been busy, caring people until the age of sixty-five, we do not suddenly abandon a way of life when we pass through the invisible barrier that separates middle from old age.

A phenomenon of the last few years has been the return to schools, colleges, and universities of older women from every walk of life. I am told by their teachers that they are a delight to have, whether as a whole class of "seniors" or as single students in regular classes. The "returning students" are alert, interesting, vocal, and challenging. They are doing much to change the stereotyping of old women, enriching their own lives in the process.

It is sad that so many of us are victims of the misconceptions regarding growing old. We too equate "old" with "bad" and waste these precious years of our lives longing for an impossible youth and dreading the future. Most of us, however, appreciate the fact of our survival. When asked how we feel, we answer cheerfully, "pretty good, thank you," or in a more Canadian "not bad, thank you." We may not agree with Robert Browning that "the best is yet to be," but we know that the "last of life" may last thirty years. We want to make those years as productive as possible. We think we can move in that direction by accepting ourselves as we are, by placing value on age instead of trying to deny it.

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First Draft

My grandmother in her lifetime
roared like a lion, prowled the boundaries
of cages she never acknowledged.

1894 to 1984: changes
in everything but her conviction,
her power, her will. She made
herself a businesswoman, she wheeled
and dealt — they tell me.

I came into her life when she was already
fifty-six, only daughter of her only daughter —
no sons. She wanted, I thought,
to buy me. I retreated. She unabated
wooed, reproached and later shouted.

She was in her prime a force
to be reckoned with, they say, with a habit
of winning. What other women mostly did,
she did. Prosperous, confident, business-
suited — in the photographs.

For the puny twelve years
of my adult life, my grandmother
was a lion at bay,
the scope of her power struck, her will
a gleaming, lasting monument.

"Old Boot," though — a grudging,
distancing compliment — still,
nervous of approaching the old woman
for fear of the lion.

This lion made leaner by increasing intelligence,
this old lady, who re-creating the old
social constraints, snarled at everyone,
she died in the night, on her side,
peacefully, we assume, from apoplexy.
Then she lay quiet, and waited like a good
little girl, for us to come and take over.

And we, who had learned for years, as if against
an opposing gale, to hold our selves steady,
to balance.

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