

Aging and Staying Visible

By Marian L. Knapp

I am probably similar to many women who are getting older. Every morning I look in the mirror and notice the wrinkles in my cheeks and the slightly puffy pouches under my eyes. I wonder if other people notice. "My glasses will cover the baggy eyes and a little make-up will give some smoothness and color to my skin," I mull and then turn away dismissing those thoughts for the rest of the day. Usually, I try not to think too much about the annoying aspects of my own aging except in brief moments in front of the mirror or when the minor episodes of arthritis in my thumbs make it hard to open a jar. Friends who are my age have similar worries and some have problems which are much more serious. I consider myself lucky. But what is lurking behind my obvious but brief obsession with my aging face?

According to commonly accepted concepts of what being "older" is, I am already there. True, I might be considered as being in the category of "younger" old (compared to "middle," "older," or "oldest" old) but I am still slotted into the "older" designation by the agencies and organizations that determine such things. I reached the standard age of retirement more than eight years ago when I turned 65 (plus two months) and the Social Security Administration said I was eligible to receive a monthly payment based on years of work. My membership in AARP, which began at age 50, tells me about perks, current topics, travel tips, and informs me of their lobbying with federal and local agencies to sustain or increase my benefits. So, powers far greater than I, have determined that I am an older adult but sometimes it is hard for me to admit it. I know people who shun AARP membership or don't tell the cinema box office personnel that they are a senior because they do not want to admit that they are older. That is their choice but they do miss out on some benefits.

I really appreciate AARP's work but with all of the terrific things they do for me, however, I am getting a mixed message. They write cover stories about famous people who are my age (more or less) as if it is a surprise that they, too, are aging. They tell me about people like Robert Redford (75) and Bruce Springsteen (62) who (can you believe it?!) are seniors. "That's nice," I think, "I'm doing pretty well, too, but I am not a celebrity. Why not feature me?" Do I have to have great name or face recognition in order to be seen as a thriving older adult?

I am fearful of a time when I might become invisible. Several years ago I made a presentation to residents at an assisted living facility. I talked about aging and how ageism creeps insidiously into our lives. One woman raised her hand and said that when she went out to lunch one day, the server turned to her daughter and asked "What does she want to eat?" She felt invisible. If Robert Redford happened to be the patron at the restaurant the server would never ask his son or daughter what he wanted to eat. He's definitely visible.

For me, there are push/pull tensions about being an elder. On the one hand, I am not afraid of saying I am older; I kind of like it – proud of what I have accomplished so far and excited about planning for my future. But, in contradiction to my readiness to tell people my age, I wait for the person who is selling the movie ticket to act surprised when I ask for the discount. I don't want anyone to perceive me as old. When people offer to help me, I usually reject it. They are being courteous and thoughtful, but they may be caught in a different kind of dilemma. "Hmm, if I ask her if she needs help will I insult her? If I don't offer to help her will she think I am callous and rude?"

So, what is the appropriate and socially acceptable response – from me and from others who see me? I really don't know. What I do know is that without talking to me and getting to know me, a stranger would have no idea who I really am – how complicated and gratifying my life is, and how I can form and express opinions. My way of dealing with these issues is to write, to talk, and to be active in my community. This is what I need to do to make myself visible. It is up to me. No one else can do it for me.

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