

Sexuality is Ageless

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Libido and longevity—are they mutually exclusive concepts? If one accepts the widely held stereotypes of the post-menopausal woman, the first is automatically cancelled by the second.

Myths surrounding older people and the whole process of aging still abound. Many are exacerbated and perpetuated by our everyday language and so-called 'humour,' such as "The older you get the harder it is to learn" (you can't teach an old dog new tricks). A stereotype is an unexamined judgment of a person according to your definition of the group in which you have placed that person. Such generalizations deny the individuality of the person being categorized in this way.

A perfect example of such generalizing, and of how our language helps create negative (and false) images, is the ubiquitous use of the phrase 'the elderly.' One reads and hears it everywhere, and seemingly *always* in a negative context. For example, in a "Dear Abby" column, a reader commented on people making jokes about others' misfortunes. Abby wrote, "From time immemorial people have been making jokes about every conceivable *human misery*. . . Without thinking, people repeat jokes about fat people, ugly people, the mentally disturbed, the blind, deaf and *elderly*." (Both italics are mine.) Such phrases as 'the poor, the sick and the elderly' are commonplace—but did you ever hear of 'the rich, the healthy and the elderly'?

The unfortunate fact is, as Bernice L. Neugarten, well-known gerontologist, said in an article in *Psychology Today* as far back as December 1971—" . . . we base many of our current stereotypes on a picture of the needy rather than on a picture of the typical older person." Personally, I would even take issue with the word 'typical' as applied

to older people. Chronological age is an artificial measure of a person when used as the sole criterion, and there is no "typical" person at any age.

For a long time I have felt that many of the stereotypes so widely accepted about being older militate against older people living as fully as they could, not to mention making the future an unpleasant 'spectre' to the young, and encouraging the billion-dollar industries intent on persuading women to spend time and money trying to look younger than they are. Have you ever thought what a back-handed compliment the "My, you don't look your age at all!" really is? What is actually being said is "Old is ugly and young is beautiful—isn't it great that you don't look the age you are!"

Nowhere are the stereotypes more vicious and harmful than in the area of sexuality and the older woman. And here the double standard with regard to men and women of the same age is most evident. As Judy Dobbie wrote in her article in *Homemaker's Magazine*, "When the Bloom is off the Rose"—"In this society, a 'dirty old man' may be humorous, but a 'dirty old woman' is sick. Besides, what man in his right mind is attracted to an 'old bag'?"

I have a copy of a so-called 'contemporary' card (and I still wonder who would send it to whom), with a wretched drawing of a female on the front, headed by the words, "Why women over 40 are so popular" (to men, naturally!) and it certifies out to show four equally unattractive illustrations headed consecutively "They don't tell," "They don't yell," "They don't swell," and—get this—"They're grateful as hell!" I don't think I can be blamed for female chauvinism when I say that this must have been created by a man.

The really sad part about society's attitude toward the older woman's sexuality is, that although it isn't true, it makes us feel it must be. In other words, when the older woman *does* have a normal libido she feels that she must somehow be abnormal. Then it follows, she will either suppress it (and

we know what harm that can do), or carry on anyway and feel guilty (also not a healthy state of mind). Comparatively few of the present generation of older women can *really* deny their probably strict upbringings, tinted as they were with the Victorian prudity, and truly accept the fact, as stated by a leading U.S. authority on human sexuality, Dr. Mary Calderone, that "Young people do not have a monopoly on sexuality. It is with you all your life."

The truth is that researchers have found that physically women show no decrease in sexual drive after menopause and late into life. As William Masters, well-known sex researcher, said, it is often the fear of sexual inability, not aging per se, that affects desire and ability. In other words, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy—if you think you can't, you can't! Dr. Charles White, director of the gerontology program at Trinity University in San Antonio, said that "When a willing, able partner is available, the female shows no decline in sexuality right into old age."

But therein lies the rub. With the female human outliving the male by an average of seven years, where do the vast majority of older women find the "willing, able partner"? The answer often is, sadly, nowhere. And, even sadder, when finding one, pressure from peers or adult children ("Oh, Mother, how can you at your age? It's an insult to Dad's memory!"), will cause her to abstain.

So, are there alternatives for those who not only have retained their libido and have accepted that it is normal, but who have lost, or do not have, a compatible male partner? Well, there are several, all of which are practised by some older women. It is unrealistic to place moral judgments on these alternative life-styles—they are not for everyone. But those helped by any one of them should not be censured by a society which has so far neglected to provide fulfilling roles for the rapidly increasing number of older women in its population.

The most commonly accepted,

and least censured alternative for the older single woman is to 'accept' the 'fact' that she no longer needs sex (after all, she can't reproduce, can she, while men can), and transfer her energies into helping others. The worst she can then expect from the critics and 'humorists' is the 'do-gooder' label, or the 'interfering mother-in-law' type of 'humour.'

A second alternative, often used but seldom acknowledged is, of course, masturbation (now euphemistically dubbed 'self-stimulation'). Again, ancient myth threatened all sorts of dire results for 'indulging' in this 'sin.' Today doctors agree that it is more beneficial for one's well-being than frustration, and Lonnie Garfield Barbach has authored a complete book for women entitled *For Yourself: The Fulfillment of Female Sexuality* (Signet Books, 1975) with a whole chapter "Why Masturbation?"

A third alternative, seldom mentioned yet obviously existing, is lesbian partnerships. Here I do not only refer to life-time homosexuals who grow older like the rest of womankind, but women who may have been unknowingly bisexual (and it is thought there are more than realized because people living successfully heterosexually may never find out). Widowed and unmarried women often seek companionship and financial help by joining forces with another compatible woman. The fact that such a relationship may eventually become sexual perhaps is shocking to some, but it is nevertheless a viable possibility. And if it *should* happen, and if the two consenting people's few remaining years are enriched by it, who has the right to judge? It is their choice, it harms no-one else, and they should not carry the burden of guilt. In an article in *Medical Self Care*, Winter 1981, "Growing Old Homosexual," it is stated that "...sex among older people is still assumed to be heterosexual" although "...about 10% of the older population is estimated to be gay."

A final alternative, even less acknowledged, and probably less often practised, is the 'ménage-à-trois' where two women will share a relationship with one man. There are many circumstances which can lead to this—sisters or close friends, one widowed, the other married but frail and sick, where the other looks after her, is one example. Though this might be considered an explosive situation with

younger people, it may be acceptable in later years where the three personalities are exactly right. The wife can even be comforted by the knowledge that her husband will have a living companion, whom she knows and loves herself, when she is gone.

Whatever your own sexual predilections, this much is clear... Older women *do* continue to be sexual beings, older women *do* have more difficulty in fulfilling those needs, and it should be the choice of each individual to select her own path without criticism or mockery from the rest of us.

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