

# Personal Perspective

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## On Inviting Seniors to the Dance of Life

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### Introduction

A friend of mine is a sturdy guy who gives an appearance of invulnerability. His crooked nose, scarred bald head and well-muscled mesomorphic body tell others quickly that he has had a few scrapes with "real life" and though his head is slightly bloody, it's unbowed. His earthy phrasing and sparkling eyes make it clear he's still strong at 62 years of age.

My buddy was an officer in the U.S. Marine Corp. He twice coached the state football champions and for ten years handled a major school system's toughest discipline problems.

I figured my good friend would be happy when retirement arrived and while we celebrated the occasion over lunch we laughed long and hard reliving some of his encounters. At the close of the "victory party" I commented, "You must be glad to be free from all that crap." His answer surprised me. He said, "I'm scared as hell. I don't know what I'm going to do. Oh, I'll stay busy, but I picture myself sitting in shopping malls with some other old codgers while we watch people

stroll through." I looked in his courageous eyes and saw his tears that underscored the deep fear this tough old combat veteran felt.

Since that encounter I have had similar get-togethers with other substantial retirees. There was the big Texan whose brilliance I greatly admired. We exchanged letters exploring complex intellectual issues. I assumed he was busily engaged in consultations with local enterprises so I asked about them. He answered, "Most of the days I just try to fill the time. Nobody *really* wants the advice of an old war-horse like me."

When a prominent school superintendent retired, both of us assumed that other superintendents would seek his services. He anticipated many and varied requests. But, two months into his retirement he shared with me that no one had even called to say, "Hello."

After this procession of retirement conversations, I got curious about the prevalence of the syndrome I called "retirement disuse." I conducted systematic interviews with 24 recent retirees (12 professional men and 12 professional women) and found their responses amazingly consistent. The crux of their statements was, "Nobody really wants my help. I'm discouraged and very afraid." As one of them said, "Don't retire." I came to understand why my Marine friend was afraid. Call it loneliness, neglect or just plain pain.

## **Disinvitation**

My friends were disinvited. To offer a disinvitation is to disinvite someone to something. My interviewees were disinvited by society to senior citizenship. The message was: Don't grow older because when you retire there will be no use for your well-developed talents. There will be no real place for you.

## **Senior Citizenship**

Senior citizenship means that a person has been around long enough to have finished a portion of their adult life. It is comparable to completing the first couple of chapters of the most interesting story you will ever write. It is the one you're composing as you live.

The *assets* of senior citizenship are powerful. First, an SC has *experience*. Herbart referred to the residuals of experience as an *Apperceptive Mass*. It was an accumulation of data resulting from the various inputs that one has received. He pictured it as a sort of bag we carry with us. It gets fuller as we live and only time can give a long range perspective to the contents. It's like me when I met a student I taught 40 years ago. Only then did I learn that the valence of Hydrogen was not the most important thing in all the world; especially when he showed me the scars on his head from the surgery for removing a tumor from his brain.

Second, SC's have *wisdom*. Again, time is the critical dimension. Wisdom is composed of principles that have held up across time. When we are young we use our limited data to form rules or principles that we test throughout the next several years. The data we gather tests those hypotheses and we revise them until we identify the ones that have predictability. They're our life's rules, our wisdom.

Third, SC's have *time to reflect* upon long range outcomes. Everyone has time to think but the folks immersed in the whirl of ongoing affairs have little opportunity to contemplate the patterns of events. Phrases such as "you can't worry about the depth of the swamp when you're up to your behind in alligators" are born out of the hustle and bustle of the "normal" travails of professional careers. But, when you step out of the "rat race" and slow down there is time to consider big pictures. Then it is possible to observe the flow of events and to

discern where things are going. The question "why" becomes more important than "when" and "how."

Fourth, SC's can devote more time to contemplating the well-being of the entire enterprise. They can practice *statecraft*. This means to be something like a captain of a ship. Members of the crew have primary responsibility for separate portions of the vessel but the captain is the person whose main task is to guard the whole operation. SC's can view the human family and speak for the totality of human life.

### **The Costs of Disinvitation**

When there is an atmosphere that disinvites people to senior citizenship the assets listed above are lost to the mainstream. In a sense it as if a society loses its scouts or lookouts. Its vision becomes myopic and the long range effects of our actions are given short shrift. Indeed, the nation is experiencing this problem now. American industries are beginning to correct that malady, but unfortunately, the government continues to be issue-driven rather than long-term policy-oriented.

Another cost of the disinvitation accrues to the SC's. For many years there has been an assumption that mental functioning deteriorated inevitably with advancing age. This conclusion was based on "sound" logic. The arteries tended to occlude with age and less blood got to the brain. Also, the heart weakens and is less able to pump blood to the head. Finally, the blood vessels in the brain hardened and the neurons atrophied. In that framework old age inevitably led to lowered mental acuity.

All this logic was challenged repeatedly by people such as Grandma Moses, Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, and Vladimir Horowitz who did some of their finest work in their advancing years. Certainly, the example of Steven Hawking demonstrates that

decreased bodily function is not tied inexorably to deteriorated mental ability.

In the meantime, research has been exploring the relation between brain functioning and precise physiological events. The general findings indicate that the brain's chemistry is vital to things like memory and creativity. The brain responds to factors that invigorate its chemical interactions. Exercise increases alertness as do medicines such as caffeine and ergot mesylates. Indeed, many interventions show considerable promise. But, the best approach, as with all health problems, is prevention. That is, the preferred treatment is to avoid the things that have to be remedied.

A major question is: Why don't people work harder at preventing symptoms of loss of mental functioning accompanied by old age? The answer is bound integrally with the disinclination to Senior Citizenship. The corollary is: Why retain an ability to think? Toward what end? If the answer is: You'll be able to sit around and watch TV. Then, a good case can be made that it is better to become less aware because the pain will be diminished. In a worst case scenario the individual thinks it is better to die and get out of the way. In fact, Governor Lam of Colorado asserted that it is everybody's obligation to die rather than use up resources that could be devoted to the young. All of which is based on the premise that Senior Citizens cannot be producers.

An alternative hypothesis is tenable. If senior Citizens were invited to participate in meaningful activities, then they would remain more mentally productive and be assets to society. Repeated reports indicate that some people apparently extend their lives until after an important event occurs. Certainly, Victor Frankl's description of survivors from concentration camps lends credence to this stance. This and similar data support the hypothesis that purpose has positive effects upon neurotransmitters and the processing of data. A problem is: Senior Citizens are deprived of meaningful data (purpose).

The deprivation of meaningful data and society's view of senior citizenship was demonstrated by a recent report about the relationship between old age and loss of mental functioning. A TV commentator reviewed studies that indicated a decline could be avoided by complex mental activity. He cited that college professors tended to maintain high levels of mental functioning. The spokesperson recommended that Senior Citizens could avoid mental deprivation by playing bridge. What an astounding stance! How many hands of bridge can a person play? And toward what end? People need real life problems that give them meaning and a reason to activate their neurons. There is evidence to suggest the rest will take care of itself.

### **Specific Recommendations**

If our society tends to be disinviting to Senior Citizenship, then what can "inviters" do? First, they can assess their own expectancies of Senior Citizens and if they regard them as inevitable burdens then change that perception to viewing SC's as assets. This stance is based on a considerable body of research that indicates other people's expectations influence self-perception.

That shift in expectancy may be facilitated by conversing forthrightly with a Senior Citizen about serious matters, especially their areas of expertise. This extinguishes talking down to them, which is born of arrogance about the implicit superiority of the "young mind set." A good opening question is "We are considering doing \_\_\_\_\_. What do you think about that?" Instantly, the conversation communicates respect for the Senior Citizen and puts the dialogue into a meaningful framework. Quite probably, the SC will review a series of related efforts and will discuss the outcomes. The greatest value will be derived from a discussion of the SC's perceptions of the reasons for the failures or the limits of the successes. This process outlines the

cutting edges of the effort and can short circuit an extensive literature review because the SC has already factor analyzed the field and identified the frontier.

A second step toward generating a facilitative atmosphere for Senior Citizens is to invite them into classrooms to discuss real problems. John Wilde, a world famous philosopher, retired and moved into Gainesville, Florida. He was invited to attend a graduate seminar to discuss whatever topic he wished. He was asked what kind of atmosphere he desired and he opted for an informal one. The students and he dialogued for four hours! It was a great class! The key is an awareness of the rich resources, including intellectual, presented by Senior Citizens. They literally offer a vastly untapped opportunity.

Permutations of the foregoing example are unlimited. Include them in policy discussions. Ask them to review the development of movements and organizations. Explore their view of how new vistas fit with the flow of history. Ask them to compare new leaders with old. Ask them to react to some serious decisions you are considering. The broad principle is to start with the assumption that Senior Citizens are a rich opportunity and that *I* have something to learn *with* them. Honest dialogue is the key element.

### **Causes of the Disinvitation to Senior Citizenship**

The major cause of the disinvitation is the competitive basis of our society. This causes us to be exclusive rather than inclusive. That is, we tend to look for reasons to eliminate competitors and to downsize our own responsibilities in order to lighten our load. In this framework retirement is a way to accomplish both goals. We eliminate a competitor and shrink our baggage.

The competitive "mindset" is perpetuated by the erroneous rationalization that says, "Competition is what makes America great." This has never been true and endangers the nation's survival. In the Information Age, progress depends on the exchange of honest information. Competitors distort information to gain advantages over each other. This will lead to catastrophes in this new climate when events unfold too rapidly to unravel misinformation and disinformation. Therefore, cooperation is dictated for societies that want to progress. Competition is dysfunctional except for some games.

Interdependence is the inevitable wave of the future and that will include everyone. Everybody needs everybody else because cleaning up our planet physically, emotionally and intellectually is a monumental task.

### **Reasons to Extinguish the Disinvitations to Senior Citizenship**

The most important reason for inviters to extinguish the disinvitation to Senior Citizenship is that it is inconsistent with their posture. Second, it is dysfunctional to our society. Third, "inviters" have a personal stake in the process. They are moving toward that zone of their existence. Our collective situation is mindful of the sign that hung on a skeleton displayed in a surgical supply house in Louisville, Kentucky. It read, "Why stand and stare at me for as I am so you someday shall be." The truth is that we all are headed for old age or toward the alternative, early death. The way we treat seniors is a cultural pattern that eventually affects everyone. It is wise to develop a healthy culture.

### **Conclusion**



If Senior Citizenship is made totally unattractive, then signs of it terrify us and we cringe at them. Gray hair is dyed. Wrinkles are covered with cosmetics. Supphose are concealed. The most traumatic question after 40 is: How old are you?

In short, society's disinivation to Senior Citizenship robs all of us of our earned right to joyfully anticipate that period of our lives when we can share our wisdom proudly and beneficially with others. Now, there is general fear of retirement and old-age homes which in too many cases offer only custodial care.

"Inviters" know that all people deserve and need invitations to abundant life. Hopefully, they will offer it to Senior Citizens and reverse a trend that is frightening some very fine people who have entered their retirement years. Inviting them to celebrate life would be a most decent thing to do.

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