

Perceptions of old age

Somebody, somewhere, once said that ‘old age isn’t for sissies; but I’ve decided that how we respond to old age depends upon how we perceive it. For instance, when my mother, Olivia, was just a little tyke she felt that if somebody hadn’t died of old age by the time they reached the age of thirty that somebody ought to shoot them to get them out of their misery. My guess is that by the time she reached 85 she had revised that age upward a time or two.

My father, Cyril, on the other hand, opined that getting older is a good thing. He felt that a person who had struggled through the peaks and valleys of life until snow crowned his head was a good person to get to know; and I guess he’s right, because the old folks have already wrestled with a whole host of problems that youngsters haven’t even thought of yet—and pinned them to the mat. But even as I heard him say that I wondered if it really works that way. This was because my mother told me one day: “After you’re eighty you can get away with saying anything you want—because nobody listens to you anyway.”

Were mom and dad at logger-heads do you think? I don’t know for sure, but I think that dad was right this time; but if mom was right—if younger folks simply ignore the older folks—I think it’s kind of sad. Just imagine how it would feel to be extra wise after coping with all the hair-pin-turns, potholes and scenic vistas of life, and then watch helplessly as your loved ones struggle through lessons and afflictions the hard way. The same lessons that that you solved long ago.

Thinking back, though, I think I understand why it happens. The vast difference in our ages was a big thing, back then. Like the grandson who watched his grandfather faltering along and asked if he was on the ark with Noah when the great flood cleansed the earth. When the answer was ‘no’, the boy couldn’t help but wonder out loud what it was that kept his grandpa from drowning. When I think of it I realize that young folks today don’t even speak the same language I do—I still use the word ‘gay’ to describe how happy I am!

My grandma Fitt wasn’t all that easy for a young boy to relate to. She was about eighty-six years old and struggled with a badly broken body and an extra sharp tongue. I wish, now, that I had been smart enough to get to know her better, because when she was young, and helped push a handcart across the plains, she was a real ‘go-getter’, and I realize now that it must

have been a hard thing for grandma to feel like a ‘has-been’ or a ‘throw-away’ after all that.

I hope that young folks whose minds and bodies are still healthy and strong, are staying close to the aged folks of their acquaintance. They have insights that were won from hard experience that can be theirs without the struggles and painful experiences that made them what they are. Remember that though their bodies are weak, their spirits are strong; and as long as their spirits smile out on the world, volumes of wit and wisdom lie there—just waiting—for any listening ear.