

Barbara Kay: The image of crotchety old people is a myth

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It's a good day to be old. A study in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science* finds that all those stereotypes of self-centred, curmudgeonly seniors raining baleful imprecations on the young and their incomprehensible preoccupations are a crock. The study reveals that oldies in every nation and culture become kinder, more conscientious and pleasant as they age.

That certainly jibes with my experience as an oldie. I am far nicer than I used to be. Nicer, kinder, more patient and simply reeking of humility. Almost everyone I know who's grown old along with me is nicer. All our prickly edges have been sandpapered down by life. The Grim Reaper may not actually be camped out on our doorsteps, but he's loitering somewhere in the 'hood. Samuel Johnson got it exactly right when he said, "The prospect of being hanged concentrates the mind wonderfully." It concentrates the mind, and it mellows the heart.

In general, old people have the same character they had when they were young; the honest are still honest, the crooks are still crooks. It's their personality that gets exaggerated with age. The people who were somewhat agreeable in youth are more agreeable with age. Likewise, the sourpusses in youth really do become Scrooge-like in old age.

Aging is a humbling experience, especially in a society that venerates youth, fitness and beauty. If you were something of a babe in youth, as I was, it is rather mortifying to face up to the physical ravages of age. I have a vivid memory of myself as a university student reading Congreve's Restoration play, *The Way of the World* for the first time, and falling upon the wonderful observation of the older comic foil, Lady Wishfort, as she gazes into the mirror, inspecting the cracks in her face "varnish." She recoils in horror: "Why, I am arrantly flayed: I look like an old peeled wall." I laughed at Lady Wishfort's vanity then, but I don't laugh now that I too am an old, peeled wall.

We're nicer because we're becoming more dependent on the kindnesses of others, and we don't want to forfeit their good will. It's our children's star turn on stage now. We're the chorus. We know we're accessories to their lives – welcomed (if we're nice) but expendable if we're suddenly whisked off stage.

We love our children as much as ever, but we know their love for us is tinged with worry. They are looking at us rather speculatively at times. We know what they are thinking. (Mum left her glasses here. She stumbled on the porch step. Is she losing it? I sure hope she has enough money for a caregiver if she is...)

To a 45-year old, that last paragraph must seem kind of sad. But don't cry for me, young 'uns. I'm not sad; I'm just realistic. Realism is a gift to the aging, because it helps you to be nice. Realism lets you know your limitations, work hard to maximize your contribution within them, let go of old regrets, dwell on your blessings, exercise sympathy for those less endowed than you (and there's always someone you know in that category). And if you're really lucky, realism lets you retain your sense of humour. In fact, nothing is so helpful to aging well as a sense of humour.

Remember what Horace Walpole said: Life is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy to those who feel. Concluding syllogism: thinking makes you nicer. I am in the thinking business. Therefore I am old, but nice.

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