

# Speaker's corner

## Aging by one who is aging

**M**y purpose is to discuss issues of aging from the point of view of one who has reached that state. Most research and discussion is done by younger people, who look from the outside in, and although they understand and can analyse what is going on, they cannot understand it from experience.

The process that takes place is a slow one. One hardly notices a change day by day. One's mind always sees oneself as younger, full of vitality, and quite able to cope with anything. It is not the sense that the adolescent has of immortality, rather it is a sense of sureness that comes from long experience.

Suddenly one notes what people call senior moments, where one forgets names and facts, only to have it return later. Then, you start losing things. They could be left anywhere in the house, in the office, or the car. You soon get comments from your spouse, wondering if you should buy radio locators that are sold by Sharper Image. You say no, but you really would like to say yes. That would be admitting a deficit!

You've always felt that you were physically fit, indeed cardiac non-impaired. You don't puff when you climb the steps, or when you take long walks. However, you notice that it's hard to twist tops off the jar, and that it requires help from spouse or friends. You join an exercise class, and because you're dyslexic you discover that when others move their right hand and left leg, you move your left hand and right leg. However, you feel comfortable with the Y. It is a neighbourhood place and friendly. You make friends there, most are almost your age, although Dan who was in his mid-80s claims seniority.

Ah! Ha! Suddenly your sight dims and you find you have a cataract requiring an operation that is quick and successful. However, the right side of the automobile is harder to see than the left, requiring that you stay in the left lane of traffic. Being a geriatric, you are often urged to move faster. Night time driving is turned over to your wife after you've bumped the fender, and had a few minor accidents. Obviously, the insurance will go up, but so far after being with that insurance company for over 50 years, they say nothing. How can all this be? In my head I am only 40 years old, and can do anything. Self image is important, so I accept the 40.

All these things are minimal when one begins to think of your friends, because one by one they're dying off. Having started my career young, many are older than me. That's a reason. It then happens that younger ones start dying and soon you get a sense of loneliness. However, when four or five people end up with cancer and others died during the same time period, it gets overwhelming. It seems like there's no one left. You talk to your students. You talk with your family. But somehow, younger people, although understanding don't really understand they are just observing aging. When you do talk with the peer, or a close peer, we are discussing symptoms, illnesses, death and dying.

One starts visiting the ill, holding hands, remembering them in the past, and reviewing life histories. You remember when we did this at about? Do you remember Ian McHarg, the Scotsman? We talk of people, places, and the things we've done. We reminisce.

You live in your familiar home, and go to your familiar office. You see all the books, pictures, and things you've

collected, all of which bring back memories. Then comes the question what do you do about all this accumulation? Can you give it away? If you give the books to the university, most will be sold at cost. But I have such a magnificent collection that I gathered over so many years, and it's a shame to break it up. Do the kids want it? No! And yet some of the art will ultimately be divided up. What about all the photographs I've collected? What about old photographs I've made. There are thousands, which at the moment are just storable.

I look at all those books and as I said each has a memory. There filed archaeologically, depending upon where and when I read them. Some are well worn, and some unopened, despite my great desire to read them when bought. There are some books that I wrote, but I still have a few copies of. There are collections of papers I've written, and God knows what'll happen to them. Does the university want them? Again, probably their answer will be, no.

I look on the bookshelves and there are two packs of cigarettes. People ask me why, and that tells the story. When I went to Moscow for the first time, Halfdan Mahler, told me to take them, even though WHO opposed their use. It was the way to get a taxi. The first year I went it was one cigarette. The next time it was a pack. Then it was a carton, and finally a \$20 bill.

Most aging papers are by the young. This is by an older person.

I see old day by day diaries that I saved for some important reason, but they remain unopened. I see magazines and articles I have collected, and they stay there until I have a cleaning spree. Once, I had somebody to help me clean up the mess. There are files from the Menninger clinic. There is material from Camp Rising Sun. There's a computer filled with articles, photographs I've downloaded, and a lot of miscellaneous stuff. Nowadays, a lot of it is anti-Bush. Before, there were collections of jokes, interesting stories, pictures of people, and much more. There are also gadgets that I've collected—scanner, a reading table I don't use, and miscellaneous electronic stuff that somehow just piles up.

And despite all this, the familiar is important. It's part of one's identity. In my life I've been asked, who and what to identify with. Clearly I do not identify with most institutions, with a single profession, or a religious group. I stay an individual who was closely linked and networked to many people, who I stay in contact with, and are my virtual friends and family. It started long ago with the Space Cadets, a collection of very diverse people, many of whom are dead, who were my educators friends, and support system. I'm also identified with my family, all the generations, and the places they live. There aren't many left. Fortunately, there are friends who live near them, and opportunities to consult, which allow me to see those who don't live in town. My family's big, for it includes five children, eight grandchildren, their spouses, and sometimes ex-spouses. We try to see everybody a lot. And I love the fact that all their values are the same. Even my stepdaughter who came at age 7 years, and now has two children, is one of the gang.

### Talk to the old for ideas.

For some reason or other, three Jewish born children, married Roman Catholics. This has caused no difficulty. Indeed, when I couple it with my patients, many of whom are Jesuit scholastics, Catholicism has become a background in my work and family. I really can't blame anybody but D'Ag who introduced me to a liberal world of Catholicism, and to the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley.

I talk of values, and I sense that my immortality is the transmission of values, and a way to see the world both to my children and my students. Even my patients have been affected. People ask if my values are religious, and I answer that they are more spiritual. As I don't belong to a religious institution, and yet am deeply interested, experienced, and well read in spirituality, that is where I am. Then, there is my work with faith organisations, the Graduate Theological Union-Pacific School of Religion.

All this comes back to me as I age. I'm constantly amazed at the many things I've done in my life, of the places we visited, the people we've known, and the changes in my focus every few years. It is, if I've had multiple current careers, but really I live in a multidisciplinary eco-system world. I see

everything that way, perhaps because as I once theorised, it was my dyslexia.

I feel like I'm wired differently, map the world differently, and frequently as others see it, asked the wrong question. Despite this, when I saw my grandmother pray, and God not responding, I asked her why she prayed, when there was no answer. Her answer was illuminating. The answer is unimportant. What is important is that you ask the right question. I believe I've been asking the right question all my life, but this has made me an outsider because most people don't think that way.

It's been a relatively happy life, despite spousal cancer. I've had an opportunity after the divorce from my first wife, to have a late adolescence where I explored many new worlds, many new ways of perceiving reality, and new relationships, all of which I'm thankful for.

As you see aging is a time for reminiscing, putting your ideas together, and sometimes telling stories. There are many more stories that I'd love to tell to those who want to listen. I'll get a chance to do so, because people are used to old men reminiscing and becoming storytellers.

**L J Duhl**

Public Health and Urban Policy, University of California at Berkeley, 410  
Warren Hall no 7360, School of Public Health, Berkeley, California  
94720-7360, USA; lduhl@berkeley.edu