

Re-Writing the Myth of Women and Aging

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Abstract

The cultural myth of the Western World prior to World War II held that women were generally not financially or socially independent nor did they desire to be so. Women were regulated to the duties of the home not the world. Women who were independent were referred to as 'Spinsters' or 'Old Maids'. Women as they aged were generally invisible, regulated to caring for the grandchildren offering basic child care. Women had lost their place as spiritual wisdom keepers and were no longer consulted when important decisions were made, politically, spiritually, financially, either within families or within communities. The onset of Feminism challenged that myth and created a cultural conversation addressing the contribution of women in all areas of life. Our aging process as women can not be exempt from this conversation. This presentation will offer anecdotal research from both individual and group conversations/interviews with women in the US and Europe that explores the origination of the myth, the responsibility of the spiritual elder/crone, and the legacy of a generation inspired by the cultural onset of feminism.

Key Words: Women; Aging; Wisdom, Spiritual

**I don't know how my mother walked her trouble down
I don't know how my father stood his ground
I don't know how my people survived slavery
I do remember, that's why I believe.
Sweet Honey in the Rock – Sacred Ground**

**We are our grandmother's prayers
We are our grandfathers dreaming
We are the breath of the ancestors
We are the spirit of God
Sweet Honey in the Rock - We Are**

Background

A young woman in her late 30's was preparing for a trip to Indonesia. She was sitting with her mother who was in her late 70's and telling her about her plans. The young woman noticed that her mother had a strange look on her face and she asked her if she was concerned about her traveling so far away. The mother replied when asked "I was just thinking about how I would have loved to have gone to Indonesia and I was wondering what I was doing at your age... I had 6 children to take care of". The young

woman then could see the longing in her mother's eyes to have had the freedom that she had come to expect, had in fact taken on as her birthright.

In an article published in the New York Times on August 10, 2008 Dudley Clendenin tells a story of a 60 year old woman he met on a plane. He says "her latest boyfriend of almost 70 had acquired a certain cachet in his peer group when sued by a young woman employee for sexual harassment. That did not bother my plane mate so much", he says, "because she believed him when he said that the woman came after him, and so did the jury at the trial. But it troubled her mother who is 85, and who found out about it when her fifth husband, who is 91, saw notice of it in a business journal he gets at the office." (NY Times 10-08)

Clendenin goes on to comment on a woman friend of 72 who works full time, "which she started doing after getting a Master's degree in her 40's, when her children were grown." Her husband of 76 is volunteering full time and they keep in touch with their mothers 96 and 102 respectively. The older mother (102) continues to do her own shopping and balance her checkbook." (NY Times 10-08)

Dr. Elliott Jaques at 83 who has studied aging for 45 years has suggested a new name for old age, the third stage. He offers that there are 3 stages to adult hood; "the first being 18-40, the second 40-62, and the third 62-85." (NY Times 10-08)

In the 1960's there was news cast every week that would honor the men and women who had just turned 100. It was at that time a phenomenal event for someone to make it all the way to 100. At that time it was highly unusual to live to be 100. The photos revealed men and women who seemed to be alive but not living. It seemed that aging and attaining the status of turning 100 did not reap many rewards. Today there are picnics and events held for the centurions that are difficult to schedule because so many of them are off on vacation according to Clendenin.

David Hackett Fischer in *Growing Old in America* describes how at the close of the eighteenth century there was cultural shift from veneration to condescension of the old and the elderly that was then reflected in our language and our manner of dealing with our older population. (1979 Oxford University Press pp91-92). Thus the descriptive of spinster, crone, old maid, and witch to describe single women as they aged. The helpless and needy widow ascribed to the married women who outlived their husbands, which was the majority.

Mrs. Dalloway, a best seller in Britain and the United States in 1925, can be seen as Virginia Woolf's conversation about aging women veiled within the internal thoughts of one character to the internal thoughts of another. Written soon after the Labor Party had gained power and women were granted the right to vote in England, and had achieved the same in the United States, Mrs. Dalloway offers us the images of aging women deeply embedded in the cultural world view. Mrs. Dalloway we are told immediately in the story is 50 and has become a solitary, isolated and invisible woman whose thoughts are often consumed with feelings of death and mortality. She is troubled by the fears and

questions of age. She is seen as a representation of extreme, problematic individualism that recognized and embraced her absolute isolation. Aunt Perry although a minor character in the novel, reminds us that aging people are easily forgotten when Peter is surprised at the end of the book by the mere fact that she is still alive.

Was Virginia Woolf prophesying the isolation that more and more aging women were to experience as we moved into World War II and beyond or was she reflecting a phenomenon that had already taken root?

The young women traveling to Indonesia could be seen as similar to Mrs. Dalloway's daughter Elizabeth Dalloway, a younger woman considering a career while her mother reflected on the limitations and expectations of her life raising 6 children. But the time for true freedom had not yet arrived for Elizabeth Dalloway. She had to choose between family and career, and eventually one would assume succumbed to normative culture in finding a husband. He then could provide her the luxury of pursuing her career as more of a hobby than an opportunity to fully participate in influencing the changing workforce.

Review of the Research

In November 2002, The National Center on Women and Aging released their findings of a national poll of 1001 women 50 and over, with a significant representation of women over 80 (8%), inquiring about the experience of women and aging. In the Executive Summary of their finding they state..."The aging of America is greatly influenced by decades of change in roles and expectations of women – changes that affect workforce participation, family structure, informal care giving, and even how women age." They go on to say,"If the current trends continue they will produce a new generation of elders quite different from their mothers and grandmothers. But to date this new generation of aging women – those 50 and older – have largely been ignored or been treated as a 'problem' that burdens, or threatens to burden, the younger population."

The results of the survey are summarized as follows:

Over 50% of the women surveyed say the experience of aging is better than they expected it would be. Older women are no more likely than younger women to report they have a disability. Women 80 and over are significantly more likely to report that they are in good health than are younger women. Overwhelmingly they report that their mental health is good. Working women are healthier and have a more optimistic reaction to aging and their financial future than their non-working 'sisters'. Women 50 and over feel strongly that many public policy issues are of importance to them including those that affect improving conditions for all ages of Americans. (Executive Summary; National Center on Women and Aging 2002 National Poll of Women 50+; National Center on Women and Aging, the Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University, November 2002).

What this tells us about women and aging is supported by a similar study conducted by the National Council on Aging in 2002 designed as a follow up on a study done 25 years prior in 1977. Both studies attempted to study the perceptions of aging held by Americans. They looked at 1155 men and women over age 65 and 3048 18 and over.

Although the myth of aging appeared to remain strong and intact, with little change over twenty-five years, the reality of life for those who were aging was what life was good. Of those over 65 the survey demonstrated very similar result to the National Center on Women and Aging in that 58% say they are happy to live to an older age. When asked what made aging vital for people 67% said that spiritual life was vital second to friends and family and health. This aspect of Spiritual Life and it's impact on aging is the focus of this research.

The current research review indicates that the primary area of interest is primarily career related issues and finances, family and friends and relationships and sex or the lack thereof. In the final chapters of many of the these texts spirituality emerged as an uncertain possibility of fulfillment. It seems that other than the process of honoring and burying our dead we have not as a Western Culture deeply explored or considered the place of spirituality for our emerging elder population.

In June of 2007 Indigenous grandmothers from North and South and Central America gathered together in what was called a 'Grandmothers Circle'. This research was inspired by that gathering in an attempt to explore and define the role of the spiritual elder and more directly what the responsibility is for Boomer Women to take their place in this wisdom circle of women as a spiritual elder. The research is very limited in providing opportunity to explore cultural roles for women who are entering a new life cycle that can involve decades. Exploring the second and third stages of eldership takes us to new territory where there are few role models on this journey into aging in a post modern world. There are even fewer roles models for aging with a spiritual awareness.

Harry Moody in *The Five Stages of the Soul* (First Anchor Books 1997) reviewed developmental theorists to discover that "Erikson and his colleagues' had omitted,... "an element of the human condition that has always been at the heart and soul of every human culture from primordial times- the spiritual element. If we are to have an inclusive picture of our human potential, he says, a map is required that requires includes the sacred as well as the secular." (p.34). It is possible to consider the dichotomy of Erikson's description of 'Despair vs Integrity' as an attempt to explore the spiritual aspects of aging, but it is not clear in the presentation of his theory that this was indeed his intention.

From that understanding Moody went on to develop his theory of the Stages of the Soul that he says take us through the journey of our life, secular and spiritual integrated. He says that; "From a spiritual perspective, the purpose of life is to achieve soul realization, the importance of spirituality is largely ignored in modern society, spirituality completes us and spiritual awakening is most likely to happen in the adult years." (p.34)

The stages as Moody describes them include; the Call, the Search, the Struggle, the Breakthrough and the Return. The Return which follow the time of spiritual struggle and breakthrough is the most vital for our second and third stage adults as, he says, "These people speak to us of eternity in the silent language of the ordinary; in the way they eat a

meal or sit in a chair; in a chance remark, an offhanded nod, a glance on the bus. With enough effort, we too can be among them.” (p.38) In essence the Return is the time when we honor the wisdom we have gained through our spiritual search by giving back, passing on to others the fruit of our attainment.

As Marianne Williamson says in *The Age of Miracles, Embracing the New Midlife...* “you finally come to realize that your crises was in fact your initiation into the fullness of your self. Having faced the fire of your initiation and survived its heat, you can now serve others in a whole new way... It’s the light that you could *only* have gotten from having faced some version of your personal hell, and now you are inoculated to the fires that rage around you.... This is not the fire of destruction but of your victory. It is the fire of your middle years.” (p52)

Rabbi Zalmon Schacter-Shalomi, founder of B’nai or Religious Fellowship in Philadelphia, has developed program that he calls Spiritual Eldering based in his own tradition. Marion Woodman, the Jungian author, believes the soul’s journey voice and urgings become imperative as we get older. She says “I ‘m talking about the small voice that says: I want, before I die, to find out who I am in my soul and who that soul is in relation to the divine.”” (Leap, Davidson, Sara, Ballantine Books, 2007, p249). As Betty Friedan says...” there is a sense that the mystery and the meaning of life is one’s ultimate quest – to be achieved somehow by a wholeness, an integration of the self, a naming and atonement of sin, an accounting of the use of one’s talents, and some achievement of ‘amazing grace’ that does not imply religion or stained glass.” (Friedan, Betty, *The fountain of Age*, Simon and Schuster, 1993, p.625)

Research Analysis

Myth is defined as a legendary narrative that presents part of the beliefs of a people...In looking at the myth of women and aging it is clear that society overall still holds to the belief that there aging women are generally poor, unhappy, unhealthy, and afraid. Yet as the Baby Boomer Generation joins the ranks of AARP and other post 50 memberships it is probable that the face of aging for women will change dramatically. In a unprecedented moment of history these women will be coming of age in the second and third adulthood with more financial power, more education, more self –awareness, greater health and more intention than any previous generation of women. They will either by default or by conscious intention re-write the mythos of our understanding of age and the aging process. My exploration here is not so much with the physical or even psychological processes that will be re- written as women come to these issues with a greater awareness than has ever been made possible before. It is apparent by the sheer volume of literature now available on menopause and it’s symptoms a topic previously hidden and silent at best, or grossly mis-understood at its most destructive and oppressive, that a new myth is already emerging.

The subject of this study was designed to explore the beliefs that women hold presently about their aging and what they see as different, if anything, from the aging process of their mothers and grandmothers. I was interested in whether or not women would

consciously re-write that myth including not only our physical and emotional concerns but also our spiritual generative needs. The inquiry looked at how we come to hold and deepen the understanding of our spiritual wisdom and through what vehicles do we then pass that understanding on to those coming after us.

This is a work in process. It is not by any means complete. The research we anecdotal based on interviews of 50 women ages 50-75 from the United States and Europe.

At the end of her book on aging, Betty Friedan suggests that just as we broke through the feminine mystique and mythos of our early years through consciousness raising groups where we discussed our own experiences as women, we now have to “face this new, unprecedented, and uncharted territory of age. She says we need to talk with one another about how it really is for us to grow older and “help each other name the possibilities we hardly recognize or dare to put a name to when we sense them in ourselves.” (p.620)

This study did in fact bring groups of women together to discuss how aging actually is for each of them. There were 6 groups. They were asked a series of questions concluding with a bequeathing statement written by the participants. The study took place over the past year (2007-2008) and included women from a range of economic and personal circumstances.

Housewives or stay at home moms
Career women
Married
Widowed
Single or divorced

The questions included the following:

1. As a child what was your understanding of aging or elderly women?
2. Who were your role models and how did they impact your life choices and your understanding of aging
3. How do you see yourself now as you are aging? Do you find others, family, culture, media, responds to you differently as you are aging?
4. How are you a role model for younger women
5. What is the myth or story of aging you would like younger generations to understand from your aging process?

Interviews were taped and hand recorded.

There were several themes that emerged in the interviews.

Question One: As a child what was your understanding of aging or elderly women

Overall the women agreed upon the mythos of women and aging that they were exposed to as children for the larger society. They saw aging women as generally more dependent than they themselves are and more likely to stay in marriages even if they were unhappy. The coping strategies that women developed as they aged, in their view, were not healthy or positive. Aging meant no fun and no money – appearance meant everything to mom at 78

When their mothers or Grandmothers did not meet that myth they tended to see them as the exception rather than the norm. The tendency of the participants to see globally that aging women and men are more concerned about money, health loneliness and crime than they actually are is congruent to the data gathered by the National Center on Aging in the United States. Many of the women stated that their relationship with their mothers had improved as they themselves aged.

Question Two: Who were your role models and how did they impact your life choices and your understanding of aging

Career women identified fathers as role models citing their personal and financial independence, work away from the home which gave the appearance as more interesting and mysterious as the role their mother played. They also admired father's ability to interact with people and sense of mastery over his life. These women developed careers in what had previously been considered 'men's fields' and found affirmative action to be supportive to their attaining these positions.

In addition they found the limitations placed on their mothers to be a negative role model and expressed clearly 'they did not want to be like them'. One woman described her mother as having "taught me women are powerless – perpetual good girl". Other role models were movie stars, single aunts who demonstrated financial independence, teachers, the Catholic nuns, and older women who were very accomplished in their industry.

One woman described her mother's involvement in the civil rights movement; another told a story of her grandmother traveling to China in the 1920's which set a precedent for women to be independent. Another said that she "saw transformation of women kind in 20 years with my mother – she changed."

One woman described leaving London when she was 2.5 during WWII with her Grandmother who cared for her until the war was over 3 years later. When they returned to England her Grandmother suddenly became more invisible even though she was 3 houses away.

Several women described relatives as role models who ran their own businesses.

Question Three: How do you see yourself now as you are aging? Do you find others, family, culture, media, responds to you differently as you are aging?

All of the women were very comfortable with the understanding that the feminist movement of which they had been a part in some way had and would continue to impact how they themselves saw themselves as they aged. All expressed a period of loss of

identity and purpose as they found themselves ‘looking in the mirror and not knowing the person who was looking back at them’.

One woman said that “Other people respond to me different at the gym – step back a little – now I am the other not one of them.” Another woman said ‘my view of aging not pleasant women become more powerless as they get older what shocked me is becoming so invisible the hardest for me. They no longer notice me; people assume I should be invisible. But all of the women agreed that they were very visible to their friends and that their friends made the aging process exciting and supportive

Single women more than married women expressed a sense of being ‘invisible’ knowing as one said that “when the clerk at the grocery store is giving me attention I know that he is seeing his mother or grandmother”. Some expressed that they could go for several days and not see anyone. Retirement meant loneliness for these women where as for married women it meant the usual adjustments of spending more time with there husbands. Married women tended to continue to feel sexually attractive whereas single women often did not. Most of the women, married or single, expressed a loss of feeling valued by the larger society particularly in regards to beauty and sexual appeal. One woman commented “I don’t see myself in the media”.

Question Four: How are you a role model for younger women?

This was the most difficult question for the groups to answer. Many did not initially see themselves as actively being a role model for younger women. The conclusion they came to was that simply by being who they were as strong, independent women influenced greatly by the feminism they entered adult hood with that they were modeling a way of coming to aging that younger women could benefit from. Some specific ways to contribute were to support the efforts for political interests such a global warming, that they are still growing and learning and having fun. One woman told a story of having had a birthday party at 60 to let the younger women know what turning 60 or 70 really looked like.

Question Five: What is the myth or story of aging you would like younger generations to understand from your aging process?

For all of the women this question brought forth the spiritual dimension. Though few mentioned there mothers or grandmothers as having modeled a spiritual wisdom, many of them saw themselves as passing on a spiritual torch filled with the wisdom of having lived and grown and made mistakes and picked themselves up. The story of aging really became a blessing they bestowed upon the generations to come after them. Here are some examples:

Love yourself, be confident, know what you want to do and be happy doing it., embrace age as a vibrant stage of life, appreciate wisdom for we all have wisdom.

Know the value of women, of yourself as a woman, live *your* life and don’t give it away.

Always, always believe that you are a good and worthy child of God. You are perfect just as you are. Don't hang out with people who tell you otherwise.

Be curious, be very curious! Life and this universe hold so many wondrous things, including you. Learn about them all! Try them all! Keep growing and learning forever. Be brutally honest with yourself. Welcome feedback and be willing to change. Listen to others and then decide for yourself what to believe.

Take time to contemplate and unravel the big mysteries for yourself. "Who am I," "Why am I here," "What is my purpose in life." Doing this will add layers of richness and meaning beyond your comprehension.

Get to know yourself inside out, and always follow where your heart leads you. Learn to listen within for the answers you need. Ignore myths, traditions, and expectations. Be who you are and go for what you want. Never lose yourself in someone else. Love unconditionally and constantly. Offer your heart. Be kind and gentle and tender with others. Delight in others, yet be independent and enjoy your own company.

Life has ups. Life has downs. Life constantly changes. Watch it all, feel it all, and know that your life is ultimately about the stories you tell yourself. Tell yourself happy, pleasant ones and let the sad ones blow away in the wind.

Much of the stuff that happens in life is not important. It just doesn't matter. There is no need to get all caught up in it and disturbed by it. Let it go. Just watch what happens. You don't need to be right, perfect, on top of things all the time. You are in control of far less than you think. Just go with the flow.

Happiness arises when you have a grateful heart, not from the "stuff" you amass or the position you hold.

Conclusion

In conclusion the study demonstrated that women do see their aging process as very different from their mothers and grandmothers. Although they have a varied response to the aging process as modeled by their elders, they themselves experience similar insecurities and strengths as they age. The myth is actively being re-written by the continued exploration of purpose and meaning that this generation of Boomer Women brings to their own search as they themselves cross the boundaries of age.