

Agelessness, Ageism, And Aging In America Today: The Myths And The Facts On The Ground

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I want to kick off these reminiscences on Agelessness, Ageism and Aging by looking at a few of the myths and facts about Aging in America

Some of you may remember the “New Age” wave that swept the country's relatively affluent youth and middle-aged-middle-class beginning in the 70's (For many of you, a similar experience may have begun with the *Dawning of the Age of Aquarius* in the late 60's.) According to some sociologists and youthful singles, we were entering a time of prolonged adolescence, spiritual growth and personal exploration without end. Academicians argued about when adolescence ended for Americans: was it in ones twenties or in ones thirties, or even 40's??. Jerry Seinfeld became the adorable icon of this singles life where you could hang out with your friends forever, with few responsibilities for anyone other than yourself.

But by the time these Boomers and pre-Boomers* were reaching their mid 40's, and Seinfeld was wrapping up his TV series (1997), it became harder to look the part of an ageless ingénue. Plastic surgery and botox has come to the rescue for those who can afford it. And as women began to dye and henna their hair, more men found this a quick remedy to aging also. Even those not caught up in this search for the fabricated fountain of youth, were seduced by the national myth that people in the USA were healthier, younger-looking, and living longer than they used to.

Let's exam the facts behind the myth that Life Expectancy in the USA has increased. Most introductory statistics text books like to use this misconception as an example of how easily statistics can be manipulated to prove whatever you want to prove. The fact is that, people in the USA are not living longer. The fact is that due to an improvement in our miserably high infant mortality rate in the US (worse than many so-called underdeveloped countries), AVERAGE life expectancy in the US was, until recently, increasing. That is, people who survived the birth trauma and early childhood, were not living any longer; but, more people were surviving and reaching old age. Therefore, the popular press, through ignorance, and the insurance companies, for their own financial interests, peddled the propaganda that the Life Expectancy had increased.

However, things are changing, even with this Average Life Expectancy statistic: The title of a new study called “ *Falling behind: Life Expectancy in US Counties from 2000 to 2009 in an International Context*” states: “The U.S. is one of the few countries in the world that does not provide universal health care for children and pregnant women. There are more than 60 million uninsured Americans. The U.S. has 59 million people medically uninsured; 132 million without dental insurance; 60 million without paid sick leave. **Furthermore, infant mortality, low birth weight, and child deaths under five are ranked among the highest in the U.S. as compared to Western nations and Japan. Among [the thirty-four] OECD** countries, only Mexico, Turkey and the Slovak Republic have higher infant mortality than the U.S. Life expectancy**

in the U.S. has fallen behind compared to other nations. A recent report by the University of Washington found that life expectancy, particularly for women, has fallen in 860 counties across the U.S. (My emphasis)

(Source: "American (Real) Exceptionalism" by Ghali Hassan, AxisofLogic.com, 7/20/11)

In a Boston Globe editorial ("Living Longer? Not in US," 6/24/11) Derrick Z. Jackson says ENOUGH! with the myth that America has the world's best health care system: "... if you measure systems by life expectancy, the United States, at 37th in the world for both men and women, is not even close to having the best...life expectancy for American women is dropping as never before in some sections of the nation. Jackson cites the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation county-by-county analysis showing that "from 1987 to 1997, there were 227 counties where female life expectancy dropped. From 1997 to 2007, the number of counties where women's life expectancy dropped exploded to 737." If we want to look for the causes of this decline in health and life expectancy, we can consider the following:

In a November 2010 analysis of *Jobs and Income Growth of Top Earners and the Causes of Changing Income Inequality*, the authors stated that "Over the past 30 years, the richest 1% of the U.S. population, the ruling class, has tripled its share of the income pie, mainly through tax cuts and financial deregulation. While, at the same time, another study on *Household Food Security in the United States, 2009*, states that "In 2009, there [were] 43.6 million Americans living in poverty, one in every seven Americans. The U.S. Census Bureau reported in September 2010 that, there were 8.8 million families living in poverty in 2009, including one child in every five. According to a study by the U.S. Agriculture Department (USDA) "6.8 million or about 5.7 percent of all U.S. households, is in serious food insecurity...At least one member of each household was forced to eat less or to switch their eating habits. Around one million children were affected." (These studies were cited in "American (Real) Exceptionalism" by Ghali Hassan, AxisofLogic.com, 7/20/11)

It was under these conditions that the new President Obama proposed to cut Medicare Advantage programs by \$500 billion back in 2009. He cut his deal with the insurance companies and the Congress; and my Medicare Advantage HMO payments increased by 52%, plus increased co-pays for prescriptions and other services. (See: [Mary Lynn Cramer : The Medicare Murder Mystery www.counterpunch.org/ cramer 12212009.html](http://www.counterpunch.org/cramer/12212009.html))

Although the price of gas and food climb, we---the "extremely low income" elderly (that is how my subsidized senior housing classifies me) have no increase in social security payments which means our real income is going down; and my food stamp allotment was cut by \$50 a month. According to federal cost-of-living estimates, "Monthly Social Security and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits will not automatically increase in 2011 as there is no increase in the Consumer Price Index (CPI-W) from the third quarter of 2008, the last year a COLA was determined, to the third quarter of 2010." However, the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that, with regard to the Consumer Price Index, "Over the last 12 months, the all items index increased 3.6 percent before seasonal adjustment. (<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/cpi.nr0.htm>). That certainly comes closer to my experience at the grocery store.

It is under these circumstances that Obama is proposing a \$3 trillion deficit-reduction package (as part of a deal to raise the federal debt ceiling before an Aug. 2 deadline) which will not raise taxes for the wealthy and large corporations, but which will cut social security payments and increase the cost of Medicare to the poor and elderly. According to CNN (7/22/11, *House, Senate Leaders Have Debt Ceiling Options*) late Friday night as I wrote this, the Republican and Democratic Senate leaders were discussing \$1 trillion or more in spending cuts to the proposed plan--\$1 trillion in spending cuts in return for \$1 trillion in debt ceiling increase---and you can guess where those spending cuts will be made. If you guess military defense funding, you lose. That \$1 trillion deal would only raise the debt limit for several months. Then they'll be back looking for more cuts in "entitlements." A friend wrote to me today,

"The usually diffident [Senate Majority Leader, US Senator from Nevada] Harry Reid said, 'This is the worst piece of legislation in American history!' How can the Party of Harry Reid re-nominate the President who endorses this legislation?"

While writing up my reminiscences on Aging in America, I coincidentally received a invitation to attend a conference sponsored by Harvard Medical School on "Aging: Treatment Perspectives and Challenges." Among the topics they will be addressing are: "The Art of Aging," "Living to 100," and, lastly, on the second day and at the end of the conference, "Sex and Aging." The latter is usually a taboo subject in our American culture. Rarely talked about personally or professionally; and seldom in public. Old people having sex!

Recently, when a young NPR correspondent was interviewing actor Ed Asner (known for his role as "Lou Grant," on the TV sitcom, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and its spin-off *Lou Grant*) he asked Asner about his latest TV role as a "crusty" old man on the new sitcom "Working Class,***" and what

Asner was experiencing personally as he aged along with the characters he plays. Asner replied, that like most old people, he now sits around a lot monitoring his bodily functions. And then he added that he often dreams of breaking out of his elderly cocoon; spreading gorgeous new wings, and reclaiming his sexual virility...of becoming the most attractive, most sexually potent butterfly you could imagine. The NPR reporter was noticeably embarrassed and at a loss as to how to respond. It is so much easier to talk glibly about sticking it to the poor and elderly economically.

*The [United States Census Bureau](#) considers a baby boomer to be someone born during the demographic birth boom between 1946 and 1964, including 1964

** "The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, [French](#) : *Organisation de coopération et de développement économiques, OCDE*) is an [international economic organisation](#) of 34 countries founded in 1961 to stimulate economic progress and world trade. It is a forum of countries committed to [democracy](#) and the [market economy](#) , providing a platform to compare policy experiences, seek answers to common problems, identify good practices, and co-ordinate domestic and international policies of its members." Our origins date back to 1960, when 18 European countries plus the United States and Canada joined forces to create an organisation dedicated to global development. Today, our 34 member countries span the globe, from North and South America to Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. They include

many of the world's most advanced countries but also emerging countries like Mexico, Chile and Turkey. We also work closely with emerging giants like China, India and Brazil and developing economies in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. Together, our goal continues to be to build a stronger, cleaner, fairer world.” (

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organisation_for_Economic_Co-operation_and_Development)

(The 34 countries are Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States)

*** *Ed Asner Returning To TV With New Sitcom "Working Class"* (

http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-31749_162-20019898-10391698.html)

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