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Too old for the young

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Too old for the young

Youth is something that the young have, but only the elderly can use it wisely.

Thomas Wolfe

Abstract: The aim of the article is to describe two different worlds, two different generations — the generation of grandparents (the older generation) and the generation of their grandchildren (the younger generation). There is a bridge between these generations which connects two distant shores – the past and the future.

Key words: generation gap, agism, young, old

Introduction

Two generations are like two different worlds apart in time and space. Nevertheless, there is a bridge between them which connects two distant shores – the past and the future.

Young people often hold the opinion that the old are useless, that they expect assistance from the state, have conservative worldview and are less tolerant towards others, especially to the youths and do not understand them. But the old people can actually contribute by their wisdom, leniency or humour, quietness as well as their ability to see things in depth, to recognize some positive aspects of solitude, to search for the meaning of life and death. Elderly people have extensive life experience and wisdom they can “resell” to the younger generation — their grandchildren. We should learn from the past.

The issue of the status of old people in society has been important to the mankind since the beginning of history. However, the ways of addressing

this problem have varied. It was the elderly who were in charge of the early communities. It was similar in case of Greece and Rome. Change only came in modern times, when we began to worship the cult of youth and the elderly were gradually marginalized. Today most western societies are aging and the question about the status of elderly people is becoming very up-to-date.¹

Respect that the old people enjoyed up until the modern times, was not accidental. People appreciated their valuable experience, insight and knowledge. That is why the communities put them in charge of making important decisions as well as the leadership. The above, however, do not exhaust the way in which they can contribute to the society. It is really a gift of grace to live to a ripe old age, since not everyone has the opportunity to enjoy the fruits of their labour, to enjoy their children and grandchildren, to live a full life.²

Comparison of the young and the old generation

The life experience of the generation of grandparents is the past, while the future is in the imagination and dreams of the children. At the first glance it appears that these two worlds have their own orbits, but in fact the opposite is true.

The concept of generation comes from the Greek word *genos* (similar to Latin *genus*), which describes a grouping of related classes or age groups. The length of one generation used to be defined as 25 to 30 years; today it is becoming shorter.³

The generation has also a wider meaning. The awareness of belonging to a specific generation comes naturally with the development of relationships with other people, shared interests, values, attitudes, need for autonomy and prospects. It is only pertained to preparing living conditions for the generation of children.

Young people are said to be irresponsible and failing to appreciate the true human values; they think that the world belongs only to them and consider the old people as useless and place them somewhere on the outskirts of society. As they are growing up and going through new life experiences, the young generation changes its attitude towards the old people. Loving the young and beautiful is easy, but to love those who are sometimes in need of

¹ K. Bošmanský: *Vybrané kapitoly z Pastoralnej medicíny*. Bratislava 2004, p. 100.

² M. Muráňová: *Malá učebnica starnutia (aj pre mladých)*. Bratislava 2001, p. 45.

³ O. Gregor: *Stárnout to je kumšt*. Praha 1990, p. 13.

care and help requires generosity and genuine love for people. Elderly people often have to face many stereotypes and prejudices that spread fast among young people.

Strengths and weaknesses of the young generation

Young people enter the society, in a way “given to them”, so therefore, their endeavour is frequently to transform the reality. They have a need to understand the society and themselves and they face the problem of how to adapt to this society. Young people show a very strong tendency towards independence, breaking ties with their families.

The main strength of the young generation is that it represents our future by being the cornerstone of our ideals and values. Young people are active, eager to address and tackle new situations, objectives and conflicts. They are demanding and more adaptable in terms of modern living conditions, leisure, jobs and friendship.⁴

Among the weaknesses of the young generation is their behaviour towards the material goods, which are not appreciated enough by them. Young people often act impulsively without considering the possible consequences, or just taking them lightly and underestimating danger. They have problems with discipline aggression and fury. It usually stems from improper upbringing, they do not have enough life experience, they are always in a hurry at the same time suffering from insecurity and unwilling to take advice from others.⁵ They think their opinions, attitudes and preferences are correct and necessary, and that only they know the truth.

Strengths and weaknesses of the old generation

The old generation is the last bearer of culture, history, heritage and of the priceless experience the old people gained in the course of their living. They are balanced, trying to be at peace with themselves, they tend to defend the society in which they live as well as to know the values that are important to them in life.

⁴ B. Kádnerová: *Vychovávame vnučatá*. Praha 1997, p. 68.

⁵ A. Walker: *Understanding Quality of Life in Old Age*. Berkshire 2005, pp. 14—16.

One of the major strenghts of the old generation is the fact that they act prudently, they are considerate and prefer to reflect on everything beforehand. Another big advantage is that the older generation has rich life experience from which they can learn, and that can lead them through difficult life decisions. They have the knowledge of things around them and the meaning of life. They are characterized by total discretion and their responses are adequate, suppressed tension, work and personal stability, steady rhythm of life and greater diligence, stable needs, ambitiousness and tolerance of the errors for the young generation — these are other important strenghts of the older generation.⁶ Futhermore, the scope of their understanding includes also historical events. They compare the past and the present, and therefore, look at the present with much more critical eyes. They have the advantage of the comparison that the young generation does not have.

Among their weaknesses can be counted unease of trying upgrading and testing anything modern, social conservatism and stigmatization, persistence on the principles and standards. They have a fear of interference in their way of life, and base their actions on the existing stereotypes. The other drawback is their excessive worry about themselves, caution, underestimating and fear of the young (due to the lack of knowledge) and defending their own personality. They put young people on the second track, because of the fear of being unable to keep up with them.⁷ They have downgraded the adaptation process, and sometimes do not understand and often oppose the latest trends in fashion (hairstyle, clothing, make-up, etc.), industrial technology and lifestyle.

Common features of the young and the old generations

Many people will of course ask: Can these two so different generations have anything in common? Fortunately, there is something they share. First of all, they have the same vital role in finding their place in the world and transform external events; give them a personal inner meaning. Secondly, they are really closer to each other than to the middle generation, which is evident in their intransigence, their partiality for their own truth, or categorical emphasis on the uniqueness of their goals and everyday problems.

⁶ B. Kádnerová: *Vychovávame...*, p. 21.

⁷ A. Walker: *Understanding...*, pp. 14—16.

Mutual attitude of the two generations

Crucial factor that shapes our attitudes towards the seniors is the quantity and quality of contacts with the senior citizen in the family during the childhood as well as in the adulthood. Promotion of intergenerational communication among young people and seniors and outside the family can bring a lot to both groups.⁸

Kádnerová (1977) divides mutual attitudes of the young and the old generations in the following way:

- *Positive, friendly opinion* — friendly and ideal position for generations to each other.
- *Hostile, antagonistic position* — hostility between the young and the older, and tense atmosphere that leads to the strong distortion of family relationships. These can be also caused by strict upbringing, alcoholism, abusive behaviour, long-term involuntary cohabitation of generations and a large difference of opinion and age.
- *Neutral position* — neither for nor against. Sometimes they are just afraid to be critical of other generations.
- *Critical opinion* — negative form but not so prominent. Negative towards the other generation and positive towards their own generation.
- *Ambivalent position* — for and against. It is not a negative, but influenced by the good or negative experiences with the other generations.⁹

Being old is a peculiar period of life, full of concern or even anxiety of approaching death. Our understanding of it cannot be full until we experience it first hand.

Conclusion

There were times in history when the old age was accepted, celebrated and sometimes even venerated. It was considered to be a matter of an individual rather than the whole society. The old people were thought of as unique and possessing the wisdom and extraordinary abilities. Therefore, they were taken seriously and listened to.

Youth is not a virtue, because everyone comes into this world young without any contribution to it. But to grow older and still be useful, that is one

⁸ T. Tošnerová: *Ageismus. Průvodce stereotypy a myty o stari*. Praha 2002, p. 54.

⁹ B. Kádnerová: *Výchovávame...*, p. 21.

of the great human achievements, which requires a lot of work and outstanding personal qualities. Johann Wolfgang Goethe once said that the beautiful young people are just inhuman work of nature, while every old man is the work of the artist.¹⁰

Old people can and should use the experience obtained during their life, passing on the wisdom to testify about hope and love, it is essential for the dialogue between different generations. The old age is a great challenge for man and a gift — it depends on each individual whether they discover and fulfill it. It is also beneficial for the young people as well as the whole society which can benefit from the maturity. If we take the old people we will enrich our lives and discover the true beauty of human beings. It is crucial for young people to learn from past mistakes and to be able to avoid them in the future.

Young people should truly make an effort in various ways to gain the wisdom from the older generation. The old generations have some good ideas and “meshing the old with the new” can be very productive in every aspect of life.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 36.