

Respecting Our Elders By Kate McCarthy

There used to be rules about how to treat your elders. Never interrupt an elder, always serve an elder first, and always address an elder respectfully by their sir names. Generations of youth had been trained by their families to respect and honor their elders, until now.

Modern society in the United States seems to have turned against the aged. Compared to other cultures, Americans have a poor track record of how their mature citizens are treated. Incidences of elder abuse and neglect are on the rise within families and institutions. Elders are victims of acts of violent crimes and deception. Some are even taken advantage of financially by their own children and often treated as useless within the family. Many are viewed as a nuisance or a burden and are sent off to live their days apart from their families, lonely, ignored and abandoned.

How could a culture change so dramatically from respect to disregard? According to Robert Atchley, author of *Social Forces and Aging*, "Ageism" or age prejudice is defined as "a dislike of aging and older people and is based on the belief that aging make people unattractive, unintelligent, asexual, unemployable, and senile." Recent research suggests that most Americans subscribe to some form of ageism.

There are many theories about why the elderly are not revered as in the past. One is that in the American culture places great value on the youth and remaining young. According to Professor and Pulitzer Prize winning author, Jared Diamond, the American "cult of youth" emphasizes the virtues of independence, individualism and self-reliance and so those who can no longer maintain those traits are not valued. Add into that the "Protestant work ethic" which esteems those who are productive and we set the stage for people losing their place in society due to aging. Another theory is people do not want to be reminded of their own mortality and so cope by disengaging the elderly from the vital functions of society. Additionally the modern family is less interdependent on each other as is the past. Physically, emotionally and financially American family relationships are unconnected and splintered leaving little room for the aged within the family structure. Then there is the use of modern technology which has replaced the need for listening to and learning from our elders. Instant information somehow has been able to supplant the need for aged wisdom. Whatever the reason, veneration and reverence for our elders has become a thing of the past.

It might be valuable to look at some of the traditional ways respect used to be shown to our elders. By remembering back to the day when Grandma and Grandpa were an important and honored part of the immediate family unit we can teach the next generation to how esteem their elders.

- Always address an elder properly - Using the traditional Mr. and Mrs. or Sir or Ma'am goes a long way to showing respect.

- Always serve an elder first – Preparing a plate for an elder according to their preference is a way of showing honor. They should be served before anyone else in the family is as a sign of respect.
- Stand up for an elder – Always give a seat to an elder who is standing. Whether or on a crowded bus at a family gathering, an elder should always be given a seat of honor.
- Always listen to your elders – As the keepers of family history, elders are a great resource of information. Since experience begets wisdom, elders’ understanding of life can be a great asset to those who listen. Always listening politely to all being said without interrupting. You never know what you will learn.
- Never rush an elder – Devoting time to patiently be with an elder and do things on their time schedule, no matter how relaxed that may be, is a wonderful way of showing respect.
- Never argue with an elder – They have earned the right to their opinion through years of experience. Arguing shows great disrespect and is a waste of energy, especially as established opinions are not likely to change at this stage of life.
- Never speak down to an elder – An elder should not be spoken to as if a child. An elder has earned the right to be treated like an adult, even if they suffer from cognitive or physical impairment.
- Help an elder – Finding practical ways to assist an elder goes a long way to showing honor, respect and love. Small things like holding a door, or helping with the grocery shopping or fixing a leaky faucet will always be appreciated by an elder.

Some of the manners and common courtesies may seem old fashioned in our busy, modern world but they are wonderfully simple ways to show honor and respect to our elderly loved ones.

Sources:

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