

SCF Board, Advisors and Staff Explore What It Means to Age

In May 2008, the Silver Century Foundation invited its staff and advisors to share an informal supper and a conversation about aging. This report on that conversation offers a glimpse of who's who at SCF as well as a chance to see what happens when ordinary people sit down to talk at length about growing older—a subject most Americans prefer to avoid.

Why would a 35-year-old want to spend an evening talking about aging? What would persuade an architect, an educator and a film reviewer to join the advisory committee of a foundation dedicated to changing the way our culture views older people?

The answers became clear when the board, advisory committee and staff of the Silver Century Foundation gathered on May 15, 2008, to get acquainted and to learn from each other by talking about the process of growing older. The 26 people present ranged in age from 35 to 80. A few had a longtime professional interest in aging—the group included a retired gerontologist and the executive director of a senior center—but most came from diverse professional backgrounds. Yet it was obvious that everyone in the room had deep feelings and strong personal convictions on the subject at hand.

The Meaning of Aging

To start the conversation, moderator Jeanette Bressler, a professional group facilitator, invited participants to define aging. Answers ran the gamut from the observation that we begin to age the day we're born to the statement that, regrettably, aging is inexorable.

Most participants, however, rejected the view prevalent in the United States: that aging inevitably means severe physical and mental decline. One man complained that too many people see aging as a disease. Gerontologist Toby Tuckman noted that the American media promote the notion that to be old is to be decrepit. She contrasted that with communities that respect older people for their wisdom and experience. Carol Jacobs, a retired learning consultant, argued that we have negative associations with old age partly because of the American fixation on youth. Anthropologist Hildred Geertz remarked that the culture we live in largely determines the way we experience aging. When we're young, we accept the unflattering stereotypes of elders that are common in the United States. Once we grow old, those biases affect the way others see us and the way we feel about ourselves.

Freelance writer Flora Davis noted that, in the past, many Europeans distinguished between at least two different stages of later life. The English, for

example, spoke of a “green old age,” during which the individual was healthy and active but beginning to experience some physical limitations, and a frail old age. Tuckman suggested that even older people who are physically frail can be happy and vital, with much to contribute to family and community because of their many decades of life. Susan Hoskins, executive director of the Princeton Senior Resource Center, pointed out one of the advantages of old age, frail or not: most of the older people she knows aren’t rocked by less important events the way younger individuals are.

As we age, we develop gray hair, wrinkles and other physical changes that our culture considers unattractive. Hoskins stated that we need to fight back by accepting those changes rather than trying to erase them. Architect Katharine Bogle observed, “It’s not just the older generations who are facing that issue. It’s starting younger and younger.” At 35, she already has several friends getting Botox treatments.

Fear of Aging

Why are so many people frightened of aging? What’s scary about it? In raising those questions, moderator Bressler noted the Foundation’s belief that the fear of aging often underlies both negative perceptions of older people and public policies that affect them.

Barbara Lancaster, a financial consultant who specializes in retirement issues, reported that one of the biggest anxieties her clients have is the fear of outliving their financial resources. Gillian Sterling, public relations and marketing specialist, said she worries that she might not be able to take care of herself in old age.

Susan Hoskins has found that many older people dread a loss of independence. Sometimes, she said, adult children try to take over: they insist that it’s not safe for a parent to drive, for example, or to live alone. This can be deeply disturbing to the parents, who fear reaching a point where their children will no longer allow them to make their own decisions.

Other participants said they were afraid that once they were visibly “old,” they would be marginalized and ignored, and they would no longer have any role to play in their families or communities. They worried about what would give their life meaning if they lived for several decades beyond retirement.

Massage therapist Max Shane observed that some of the fear of aging might arise from the fact that it’s associated with death. Americans don’t like to deal with death, he said, but in his view, we have to accept not only aging but also the reality that we’re going to die. To Shane, that means that every day he’s alive is a day to be embraced. We must learn to live in the moment, he said.

Contact between Generations

The gathering moved on to consider the question: How much do the generations mix? When participants were asked to talk about their own experiences, some responded that they had a lot of contact with older and younger individuals. Photographer Sally Davidson, for example, volunteers as a docent at an art museum, where she may present the same art works to middle school children one day and to older people the next. Each time, she has to adapt what she says for the generation she's addressing, and that's a challenge.

Flora Davis remarked that she lives in a retirement community where the median age is 83. "People sometimes ask me why I would want to live in a place where everyone is old," she said. She noted, however, that her fellow residents range in age from about 65 to 100, a 35-year difference. If she were living in a community that consisted of people between 25 and 55—also a 35-year difference—no one would think anything of it. The assumption that it's boring or depressing to live among elders is sheer bias, Davis said.

Older People as Role Models

Throughout the evening, participants told stories about elders in their own families. Consultant and meeting planner Janet Pickover spoke of her mother, who started her own business at the age of 55 and continued working until she was 88, a year before she died. "Her attitude was that the past was the past, and you always have to look forward," Pickover said. Gillian Sterling's mother-in-law lived to be 101, and Sterling is convinced that she survived for so long because she was never afraid to ask for help.

Gonthar Rooda, director of a life-extension institute, recalled that he and his wife left their old lives behind and moved in with his father when it became clear that he could no longer safely live alone. Rooda was fortunate, he said, to have a profession that allowed him to relocate. "There's a time when it's OK to go and live in California or Europe," he suggested, "but there's also a time when families should live together." The years he spent taking care of his father allowed him to mend some bridges, which wouldn't have happened if his father had been in an institution such as a nursing home.

Hildred Geertz observed that in the cultures with which she's familiar as an anthropologist, people generally have a large, extended family to help out in times of need. Part of the problem in the United States, she said, is that our support system has narrowed to the nuclear family. Other participants remarked on how scattered today's families often are. Trainer Michael Cruickshank, for example, noted that his parents live in Florida, and that there was no way he could move there to take care of them. Web editor Charlotte Hussey suggested that in planning for their old age, people ought to think about what kind of

community support they're likely to need, especially if they have no family nearby.

Reuben Loewy, a marketing consultant who lived in Israel for years, recalled that on a kibbutz three or more generations live together. As people grow older, the kibbutz finds jobs for them at which they can work for as many hours as they like.

New Approach to Retirement?

Several participants suggested that the world of elders is changing and that boomers will approach aging and retirement very differently. They will want to continue using their skills in the workforce or as volunteers, said book editor Janet Stern, the discussion leader for SCF's Silver Cinema Film and Discussion Program.

Barbara Melnikov, assistant director of EducationWorks, observed that nobody is educated about what to expect from aging. Schools and families seldom touch on the subject, and it rarely comes up even in conversations with friends. She expects the SCF website to become a place the public will visit frequently to learn about aging and about choices for the second half of one's life.

Katherine Klotzburger, president of the Silver Century Foundation, suggested that in a future meeting, the group should look more closely at how the culture has formed our ideas about aging. We need to sort out for ourselves what's true, she said, and what we believe simply because we've absorbed it from the culture. That can be important because our ideas about aging impact the way we think about ourselves and others, some of the decisions we make and even our health. Studies show that people who have a positive attitude to aging tend to live longer.

By the time the meeting broke up, it was clear that all participants were well aware that age bias is a significant problem, and they had been drawn to SCF by the Foundation's mission: to promote a positive view of aging for everyone.