

Having a Gay Old Time

Growing older . . . and better

One social scientist has called the elderly "the minority to which we all hope to belong one day." If nothing else serves the purpose, the inescapable fact that we will all get old unless we die sooner should temper the all-too-common discriminatory behavior of gay men--and to some extent, lesbians too--known as ageism.

"Being old" is a relative thing of course. I remember being made to feel old at the time I came out at age 25. As I myself grow older, I find friends my age self-defining a "desirable crowd" with ever more generous parameters. The age at which others are deemed "over the hill" creeps upward, from 25 to 30, 35, 40.

For many, there is a merciless aesthetic curve which seems to reduce the numbers of individuals who appear attractive in terms of purely sexual desirability. Notwithstanding the possible validity of the assertion that gay people of any given age group tend to keep themselves more attractive and in better shape than their straight counterparts, ageing does take its toll, and none of us is exempt.

So ageism has for all of us both a contemporary and a future relevance. Regardless of how any of us choose to relate to older gays now, we have to hope for happiness when we become older gays ourselves.

The problem has both a narrowly sexual aspect and a broader social dimension. Since gays already fall under social disapproval for same-sex relationships, we would appear to be freer than others to transcend the age limits of socially-condoned sexual partnerships.

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Sometimes this is done very successfully, but often gays find they share one of those "retrograde" social beliefs which holds that sex is "right" only between coevals. Intergenerational sexual relationships, straight or gay, frequently come under harsh social disapproval. It is as if some sort of ancient taboo was being violated. Indeed, in the case of gays, such relationships often provoke a level of hostility which must be counted as one of the fundamental reasons for social homophobia.

To be sure, as the gap in age between partners widens, many real differences appear. As we ourselves get older, it is not a little disconcerting to discover we have our differences not only with those older than ourselves but also with an emerging younger generation. As pollsters

discovered this year, this phenomenon has major implications for our nation's politics. These differences (often epitomized by musical tastes) can also provide barriers to friendships between younger and older gays.

Older gays have the justest cause to complain when they find themselves excluded not just from sexual relationships with younger gays but even from friendship or simple conversation. In the long run, I think the younger gays lose the most from their ageist discrimination.

Many of us take considerable pains to assemble circles of gay friends to replace the straight acquaintances who have rejected us or who no longer seem suitable as intimates. I think it is a good idea to avoid choosing these friends through an "aesthetic porthole," i.e., by setting rigid standards of superficial appearance for those with whom we deign to associate.

The variety of our existence can only be enriched if we reach out to gay people of all ages. There is a special joy in knowing gays of the age of our natural mothers, fathers, uncles, aunts, older brothers and sisters. The intimate warmth one feels towards loved relatives is enriched by the possession of gay sensibility by their counterparts in these new circles.

INDISPENSABLE CONTRIBUTIONS

To demonstrate the point, I think it's worth mentioning just a few of the indispensable contributions of older gays and why younger gays should be grateful for them.

For starters, older gays provide models of survival. As we get older, the "legitimate" excuses for remaining unmarried become fewer, and our exposure correspondingly greater. The benevolent assumptions of the heterosexuality of young men and women in their 20s turn to suspicions when they reach their 30s and often harden into convictions when they are in their 40s. Older gays frequently have to endure profound social contempt, aggravated by an unsympathetic attitude towards the sexual needs of older people generally. Unless social attitudes change drastically, we too will have to survive these challenges, and so we have much to learn from those who are facing them already.

Older gays provide us with our history and traditions as a subculture. Like primitive cultures, our modern subculture is largely dependent upon oral tradition for a sense of our past.

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