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Advanced in years

Americans have long valued youth over age and experience. Shouldn't seniors have their moment?

By Frank Bures

NOT LONG AGO, a letter appeared in our local newspaper. In it, the writer argued that the U.S. death toll from COVID-19 (more than 525,000 at this writing) couldn't be compared to the U.S. death tolls of various wars: Korea, 36,574; Vietnam, 58,220; World War II, 405,399; the Civil War, 498,332.

The reason, he wrote, was that wars killed young people. COVID-19, on the other hand, was killing old people.

"The average [age at] death of a soldier," argued the writer, who was in his mid-70s, "is conservatively [estimated at] 25, and if they lived on average to be — again, conservatively — 75, each death represents 50 lost years of life. The most common age of COVID death is over 70, and even with a life expectancy of 85, that's a 15-year loss of life or less.

"A death is a death," he concluded, but averred that even so, a 25-year-old cannot be compared to a 75-year-old.

Many of us feel this way: that the death of a young person is more tragic than the death of an old one. In this calculus, a life's value is determined by the number of years not yet lived, rather than the amount of life experience acquired. This assessment posits that potential life is more valuable than actual life.

If we follow this logic to its end, here's where we find ourselves: believing that the process of living is one of inexorable decline, and that every day we are worth less than we were the day before until, at the end, we find ourselves without any value at all.

David Lancy, an anthropologist and the author of *Raising Children: Surprising Insights from Other Cultures*, coined a term for this kind of mentality, which he found to be prevalent in the United States: He calls it a "neontocracy," meaning it is centered on its children. They are considered the society's most valued members.

Lancy first took note of this in the 1960s, when he was doing fieldwork in Liberia. "In the village I studied, you'd see far more instances of little kids running errands for those who were older, bringing food, bringing tools," he told me. "Children are at their beck and call: 'Go fetch this! Go fetch that!' Any adult in the community, in the village, has the right to tell a kid what to do. It seemed so different from contemporary child rearing in the United States. In our society, we impose very little of our needs on children.

"In our society," he concluded, "children rule."

When Lancy came back to the United States, he started reading ethnographic manuscripts focused on other cultures around the world. After studying more than 1,000 societies, he realized that what he had seen in that Liberian village was the rule and that U.S. culture was the exception. In most places, he found, children are not even considered full persons; instead, personhood is something you earn. "One of the common threads that run through those societies is that children start out with very few expectations, and very little importance," he says.

If our culture can be described as a neontocracy, the arrangement that he found to be more common throughout the world is what he calls a "gerontocracy": a society in which the elders are the most valued members. "In a gerontocracy, your venerable age alone gives you status," Lancy says. "On top of that, good work, hard work, taking care of others — all those things — can enhance your social standing. A child doesn't have any of those experiences. What's considered important is what the child contributes to others and how they contribute to the community as a whole — not what they accomplish on their own. Gerontocracy, in many ways, is much more compatible with our evolution as a species."

How did we in the United States get to be this way? How did we arrive at the point where we worship our children and scorn our elders? According to Lancy, by the middle of the last

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century, parents began putting their children on a pedestal, and that tendency has increased with every subsequent decade. At the same time, the birthrate was dropping, so in a sense, the value of each child increased. Children also consumed a growing share of family resources.

The American love of youth has deeper roots than that, however. In the late 1800s, historians say, the process of aging came to be seen as a medical problem to be solved. In her book *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism*, Ashton Applewhite makes the case that this trend accelerated in the 20th century. "Propelled by postwar leisure and prosperity, the explosion of consumer culture, and research into a stage of life newly dubbed 'adolescence,' youth culture emerged as a distinct twentieth-century phenomenon," she writes. "As this 'cult of youth' grew, gerontophobia — fear of aging and dislike, even hatred, of old people — gained traction."

Throughout the 20th century, the status of our elders fell, and today they find themselves at the very bottom of the ladder. We're all future senior citizens, if we're lucky, but we often look down the road with fear and denial. In 2019, Americans spent $53 billion on anti-aging products promising to stave off this natural process, or at least the appearance of it.

Yet among the costs of neontocracy, perhaps the most telling is our underwhelming response to the deaths caused by the pandemic, which has disproportionately killed our elder citizens.

Imagine, for a moment, that COVID-19, when it arrived, killed 80 percent of infected children. There would have been panic. There would have been outrage. And there would have been action and much more serious attempts at controlling the virus, as there were in less youth-centric cultures such as China, Italy, and Spain. We would have taken extreme measures to protect our most valued citizens.

But we didn't. And now the generations that fought in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam are on the front lines of this war, too.

Jim Puppe knows that old age is not a long slide into irrelevance and that getting through life, and through hardship, can increase the value of one's life. Growing up in North Dakota, he heard stories about the Depression, about the "Dirty Thirties" of the Dust Bowl, about World War II, and other challenges that society faced. Yet, he recalls, the people who went through those hard times didn't seem bitter. They didn't seem angry. Rather, they seemed content. In fact, the more adversity they had seen, the more content they were.

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Puppe wanted to know why. So in 2004, after he retired, he set out to find one person in each community in his state with wisdom to share. He would show up in a town and ask around for someone with "human spirit, optimism, good morals, values, and integrity" whom he could interview.

More often than not, this was someone older, a person who had made it through tough times. Puppe would sit down with them and listen to what they had to say. At the end of each interview, he would ask what advice the person might have for their grandchildren. "They would say love, respect for others, honesty," he told me when I called him. "But one fellow just sat there for a minute and said, 'I have no advice for them.'

"And I said, 'You don't have any advice for your grandkids?'

"And he said, 'No. Let how I live be my advice.' "

Over 14 years, Puppe visited 617 towns, and he published the stories he collected in a book he titled *Dakota Attitude*. "What they told me was just priceless," he says. "There's a vast resource of knowledge, experience, and wisdom that we can gain from these folks that's been untapped. In my opinion, most of the problems we have in the world today could be solved by a good grandma."

If anything good comes of this pandemic, my hope is that more of us will end up like Jim Puppe, and less like my local letter-writer. I hope we can come to see that life becomes more, not less, valuable with age. And if our culture won't change from its child-centered ways, then let's each create our own small gerontocracy among the people we know — before all that wisdom, all those memories, and all those lives are gone. ■

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