

Humor and Aging **Keeping our Wits About Us**

You know you're getting old when you stoop to tie your shoes and wonder what else you can do while you're down there.

What's so funny about getting old? Aging is an issue that creates dissonance in most of us. Popular humor in birthday cards tell us that the passing of another year means we are getting wrinkly, unattractive and incontinent. Rare is the card for a birthday over age 39 that talks about aging as a joyful, happy experience.

One study found only 10% of birthday cards offered an upbeat outlook on aging, and only 25% of jokes about aging presented a positive view. Of those that were positive, twice as many were about men than women.

According to Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don Nilsen, authors of the Encyclopedia of 20th Century American Humor and leaders in the International Society for Humor Studies, humor as it relates to aging can be examined in three ways:

- 1. Humor created by the general population**
- 2. Humor created by older people, themselves**
- 3. The role humor plays in people's lives as they grow older**

HUMOR AT OR BY THOSE AGING

The first two categories are tricky. Whether or not a joke about aging is perceived as humorous is multifaceted. Who is telling the joke—comedian, contemporary or friend?

What is the mood at the time and what is the perceived attitude of the joke teller? How old is the joke teller? Are they part of the "in" group?

Consider this birthday card message: Don't worry, 50 is just a number...and the Titanic was just a boat...and World War II was just a misunderstanding.

If given by a younger person, this might be regarded as an insulting put-down. The same remark told by a 55- or 60-year-old, however, could be viewed either negatively or as a way to "play with" the anxiety of getting older. It

all depends on the perspective and point of view of the recipient.

"Oh, to be 65 again!" Edna La Shan said at age 75.

Humor created and enjoyed by older people, themselves, frequently deals with negative aspects of aging. Prostate and circulation problems really can create unpredictable sexual performance for men as they age, and sexual jokes are just as popular among older people as with youth and younger adults.

The elderly enjoy playing, "got ya," with the notion that many younger people believe seniors are washed up, sexless and addle-brained. Consider this popular joke among senior:

A 90-year-old man was getting a pre-marital check-up and told his doctor he was preparing for his marriage to a beautiful 19-year-old girl. After an extensive exam, the doctor shook his head and said to the man, "I'm not sure this is such a good idea. It could prove fatal," to which the man replied, "Well, if she dies, she dies."

These ads appeared in Senior Personal postings in Florida and Arizona newspapers:

FOXY LADY — Sexy, fashion-conscious, blue-haired beauty, 80's, slim, 5'4" (used to be 5'6"), searching for sharp-looking, sharp-dressing companion. Matching white shoes and belt a plus.

LONGTERM COMMITMENT — Recent widow who has just buried fourth husband looking for someone to round out a six-unit plot.

HUMOR IN THE AGING PROCESS

The third category—the role humor plays in people's lives as they grow older—is exemplified by the rapidly growing Red Hat Society, open only to women over 50.

Red Hat Society encourages older women to start practicing for an outrageous old age right now. The society was inspired by the poem, "Warning," by Jenny Joseph. The poem is common-

ly known by its first line, "When I am an old woman I shall wear purple." The poem continues, "With a red hat which doesn't go and doesn't suit me..." The marching uniform includes purple attire and a red hat. The poem tells us there is a freedom age can grant us. According to its website, www.redhatsociety.com, the rallying cries of Red Hat members are, "Why wait?" and "Women just want to have fun."

Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Gray Panthers, said there are three good things about aging:

- 1. Everyone who has told you, "You'd better not do that," "That's not going to work" and, "Are you going to wear that?" is dead.**
- 2. Since no one takes old people seriously, you can be the person you were always meant to be. Women can be more assertive, men can be more nurturing, and both can strive to be public nuisances.**
- 3. Because there have been real losses along the way, this is the opportunity to make new friends, explore new interests and try on new roles.**

At age 67, Jane Juska raised eyebrows with her book, *A Round Heeled Woman: My Late-Life Adventures in Sex and Romance*, in which she describes having sex with "a lot of men" during her senior years. Talk about exploring new interests!

Too often aging is seen as a disease—a process to be feared and loathed, and rarely anticipated with excitement. Humor can help with the changes, challenges and unexpected obstacles and hazards. For most of us, a playful spirit and a hardy laugh can help us speak wise truths and bear the unbearable.

Kay Caskey and Laurie Young teach *Health and Humor, Successful Aging and Holistic Approaches to Play Across the Lifespan* through Western Michigan University's Graduate Holistic Health program. They also give keynotes and workshops through their company, *Laughter Works*. www.laughways.com