



Barry Rueger: Oh, so you think you know us olds?

We aren't incompetent, we aren't all rich, and we can handle a four-letter word.

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By: Barry Rueger

A few months ago my wife Susan and I travelled to Vancouver Island to meet a breeder of Great Dane puppies. After decades of rescuing dogs and cats, we had decided that it was time to finally splurge and adopt the dog of our dreams.

We met the breeder, and his Danes, and his puppies, and spoke at length about our experience with dogs, our training as dog handlers, and about the life that we expected to offer our new pet. Even though his prices were higher than some breeders, we were ready to pay it. These were lovely dogs.

We returned home and waited for the email telling us when our puppy was born. And waited. And waited.

After the breeder ignored us for more than a month, we finally put the pieces together: he had decided that we were too old to adopt a dog. Our income, experience, and knowledge meant nothing because we had grey hair – especially since he had said his “best” puppies were all reserved for cool young couples living in Vancouver’s trendy Yaletown neighbourhood.

In an age when almost everyone accepts that you can’t refuse people service on the basis of race, religion, culture, or disability; when right-wing pundits cry in their beer because they’re expected to be respectful of people who are different from them; when #MeToo, and #BLM, and Trans rights are part of the public discourse, there’s still one group that you can mock, insult, and discriminate against: old people.

On one day it’s oh-so-cool tech gurus complaining how they need to dumb-down products because old people can’t understand computers and smart phones. That might include the people who literally invented the Internet and personal computing. They’re now in their sixties and seventies.

On another it’s being ignored at a local restaurant because the servers believe that Old People don’t tip. (We do. Usually 20%. Unless you ignore us.) Incidentally, the [American AARP](#) claims old people tip *more*.

The most absurd are thirty-year-olds who apologize all over themselves for dropping a “fuck” into conversation as if we’re poor innocents that will be shocked into a heart attack if we hear a “curse-word.” That wasn’t true when I was 20, and it’s sure not true now. I grew up with George Carlin’s “[7 Words You Can’t Say On Television](#)” so you’re not about to shock me.

Every few years a movie or [TV series](#) will appear that tells of an older (invariably widowed) couple who fall in love. It will be a comedy because obviously old people falling in love is just ridiculous. Their children will be very concerned because, well, their parents are OLD people. And the writers won’t dwell on sex because 70 year old people don’t do that, and besides, it would be gross!

Still, I’ll take that bad romance over the inevitable inspirational stories about people 60, 70, or 90-years-old who run a marathon, hike the West Coast trail, or [climb Mount Everest](#). Or get a law degree, or get elected to office, or do important scientific research. Or get married.

“Look Martha! That old person is doing stuff that young people usually do!” Or “Isn’t that sweet, that old guy just kissed that old woman.” Or “Wow, she’s 60, and just started a business!”

Well, big whoop-di-do.

I’ll actually place the blame for these prejudices at the feet of the media, and especially advertising. Whether it’s the sheer inanity of Norwich Union’s 1990 “[It’s Patrick He Took Out Life Insurance!](#)” ad series, or the infomercials for [Acorn stair lifts](#) and [walk-in bath tubs](#), the truth is that advertisers of all stripes portray older people as infirm, often confused, and not very bright — yet loaded with cash to spend on junk that claims to improve their lifestyle.

Contrast that with the image of older people presented by retirement communities and the government: happy healthy Senior Citizens, with (moderately) active lives, great big smiles, and some kind of unspecified comfortable income that lets them relax, dress well, and take cruises to Alaska. Ah yes, those fabled days of happy retirement!

That picture ignores the hard reality that not every old person is enjoying that happy, healthy lifestyle. The [government’s own figures](#) show that about 5% of the senior community lives in poverty, and while those statistics do suggest that the elderly are wealthier than many working-age people and their children, the truth is that many of us continue to work just to make ends meet.

Unlike younger people — who still enjoy health, energy and time to get ahead — many older people are forced into retirement with no real hope of escaping poverty.

Then there’s the matter of healthcare. Being an old patient means that your busy life is not a priority. Everyone in health care assumes that you can be scheduled to whatever time is convenient for the doctors or nurses. Surely you’re not holding down a job anymore? More frightening is the growing sense that there are [some medical procedures that you’re just not offered because of age](#). Then there are the frank statements by doctors who warn that, in the face of a shortage of ICU and ventilators, elderly people will not get access to life-saving interventions.

The picture of the cute, befuddled, but loveable old senior, working the garden of the (fully paid for) family home with no worries beyond the next bingo session at the community hall is nonsense. We have responsibilities to our families; we struggle to pay our bills, just like everybody else.

But it’s this nonsense that provides cover for governments that don’t want to provide pensions that meet the poverty line.

I’ll acknowledge that some old people are doddering old fools. The secret is that they’ve *always* been doddering fools. I’ve known people that were “old” at age 25, with a boring job, a boring house in the suburbs, and a boring minivan.

Stop and talk to the old people that you do know. Don’t ask about grandchildren or Facebook: ask about how little they get from their pension, or how much of that money goes to medicine and health care. Find out where they’re cutting corners to cover the rent increases every year.

Armed with that information, ask yourself if the pensions and services we’re offering are enough for older people that haven’t had the luck to build up healthy RRSPs or real estate holdings. This matters because sooner or later it’s going to be *you* that needs them. In the meantime wise up to the truth that the 70 year old you saw in the park could easily be a friend, a business partner, or even a lover — if you could get past your prejudices.

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