

October 2, 2011

Ageing actively

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Growing old is more than a mere matter of numbers. One can still live life on one's own terms, says VISA RAVINDRAN.

Life shrinks or expands according to one's courage. Anais Nin

In Japan they call them the Wisdom Years; in some special parts of the world they belong to the Blue Zone and disseminate information on how longevity has been achieved in different areas, different communities. How you remember your life, how you experience your life add up to how you feel about it later and Blue Zones study the long-lived to learn what keeps them happy. The WHO wants empowerment for them. In many countries, including ours, sadly, many of them become 'the Burden', 'the Unwanted'. The reference, in all these contexts, is to Senior Citizens, euphemism that sees human growth merely from a chronological basis and therefore flawed from the start. Age is after all, also physical, mental, biological and spiritual, some dimensions completely overpowering the ageing individual and others transforming them to a well-honed mellowness and maturity that find a place for them in the Wisdom Years.

Coping with stress

Various factors, such as social networks, religion and spirituality, active engagement with life and having an internal locus of control have been proposed as being beneficial in helping people to cope with stressful life events in later life. Social support and personal control are possibly the two most important factors that influence well-being or morbidity and mortality in adults. Other factors that may link to well-being and quality of life include social relationships (possibly relationships with pets as well as humans), and health.

Yes, health security, social security and economic security are the greatest challenges for our elders, agrees Indrani Rajadurai, former National Director and at present Special Adviser with HelpAge India. Asserting that active life need not come to a halt at 60, she adds that "mental alertness, keeping oneself interestingly occupied, positive thinking, exercise, walks, simple but nutritious food, feeling of contentment, no expectation, acceptance of the ageing process, feeling good and useful, not worried, developing hobbies, and enjoying good sleep etc are needed for active ageing".

Homai Vyaravala, whose lens captured the great events of post-independence history, leads a quiet, independent life in Vadodra and till recently, was her own plumber, driver, electrician and cook says an article in *Harmony*. The same article also features Urmila Vaidya, 85, who had recently learnt to play the flute and delivered her first performance at the Bansuri Utsav in

Mumbai. Though the art is demanding on the lungs, this spirited lady puts in about four hours of practice on a daily basis, and chuckles that she is preparing for another concert in a few weeks' time.

Remarkable output

Shyam Benegal is 76 and going strong, happy with his journey so far, from “Ankur” (1973) to “Well Done Abba” (2010). This sensitive and prolific filmmaker has contributed much to the cinema of the 1970s, often spoken of as the definitive years of the Indian cinema movement. Musicians like Ravi Shankar, Pandit Jasraj and Shobha Gurtu scintillate with voice and instrument even at an advanced age. These are remarkable men and women achievers, who live life on their own terms, quietly making the adjustments that the passing of time demands, to be able to live rich and fulfilling lives. Their secret is that they reach beyond the restraints advancing age imposes on one's lifestyle — the inevitable physical, financial and locomotional ones.

Anais Nin, the French-Cuban writer, makes an insightful observation when she says, “We don't see things as they are; we see them as we are.” Attitude is all — Stephen Hawking, given just a few years to live, breaks all conventional expectations, travels, speaks, discovers new ideas every day.

Andrew Harrop of Age Concern and Help the Aged says: “While many people can't wait to retire, others want to continue working in later life, whether it's because they enjoy their jobs or to boost their retirement income.” Working into later life will bring many benefits to our economy and to the individual, but this will only be achieved if employers are willing to adapt to older workers' changing needs: “More flexible working, particularly to take account of more chronic health conditions that are suffered in later life would also give employees the confidence to continue working into later years.” Do we want our grey population to be young at heart, independent, happy in active engagement with life or despondent, dependant, making much of physical ailments that generally accompany ageing but need not if one is active and well-adjusted to society? The answers are in our hands and in a community that is not ‘ageist' in its attitude to the older members.