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The ADR Bulletin

UN Social Justice Statement for Older Persons

Conflict resolution in the 'sage stage'

Stella Cornelius

This article is an extract from the speech made at the launch of UN International Year of Older Persons Social Justice Statement, on 23 September 1998.

I thank the United Nations for declaring 1999 The International Year of Older Persons. I quote from my colleague of many years' standing, Dr Keith Suter:

> What is the value of such international years? First, they are often used to focus attention on an issue being neglected by governments…
>
> Second, … a deadline makes an issue an 'urgent' one, a set of targets need to be produced, government and community get moving.
>
> Third, international years provide a coatpeg on which to hang events to get the mass media's attention….

Let us hold in the forefront of our mind that what we are focusing on in the UN International Year of Older Persons is, undeniably, a human rights issue.

If we look at the over 60 group, in 1950 worldwide there were 200 million; the forecast is by 2025 we will have 1.2 billion, a sixfold increase. Far too often people regard this first and foremost as a social problem. To me, we have created the successful society.

How else do we judge ourselves? A point well addressed in the Social Justice Statement we launch today — surely, when the environment can offer people a longer life, more years of a better quality of life, and the chance to see your children and grandchildren and your great grandchildren along their path, we have succeeded. Let us dissent from the dominant discourse, pause and celebrate.

I find the fear that we will not be able to take care of our aged is largely unfounded. Less than 5 per cent of people over retirement age are in need of special care. 'Who will take care of our frail aged?' is the cry. What I observe is that most people taking care of the aged are the aged themselves.

More and more people, with new information and more options available ►

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to them, have planned appropriately for the financial needs of their later years.

Noel Winterburn, Convener of 'Conversations for the Future' tells me, 'If I had known how old I was going to be I would have taken better care of myself.' Once you get over the surprise you can learn to deal with it. With better health — and sometimes, with technological aids — we are more able to be active and independent longer and longer, and have the capacity and the experience to take care of others.

The statement says: 'Old people … are more likely to be giving care than receiving it'. We must not ignore the many families (including ethnic units, those magnificent exponents of the gentle art of grandparenting), where the possibilities of both parents being in the workforce is created by older family members taking care of the children. Surely this is true integration.

Perceptions of the old

For a positive view of ageing, I turn to Dr Sue Kurrle, Geriatrician at Hornsby Hospital, member of the Guardianship Tribunal and a director of the National Senior's Association:

> Often later life is regarded negatively, as a time to be dreaded and feared. There is a perception of inevitable ill health and disability. For the vast majority of the older population this is not the case. Instead, later life should be seen as a time of maturity and fulfilment, a time of spiritual richness and physical contentment. It is illness that causes disability, not the passage of years. In the absence of disease, a full active satisfying life can be led.
>
> Exercise is one of the keys to healthy ageing. Taking a positive view of life is essential. See the cup as half full not half empty, and continue to enjoy the contents.
>
> Don't resent growing old — many are denied the privilege.

It is true that words like 'old', 'aged', 'retired' and 'senior citizen' sometimes get bad press. I love the inspired namer (comes from the United States, where else?) who described the old as 'CBs': the chronologically blessed. My own contribution to naming is to describe people in my own group as the new 'AAs': no, not 'Alcoholics Anonymous' but the 'Active Aged' .

In my years as an employer I frequently found myself enormously supported by older employees — not without its problems. I remember Bruno, a superb storeman, comfortably into his '70s, to whom I once said: 'Bruno, living on your own must be very lonely. Why don't you ask Anna [who was a fellow employee] out to dinner sometime?' To this Bruno, with his charming mid-European accent, replied: 'Anna? Not Anna, she is too old. I am old enough myself.' To paraphrase Oscar Wilde: 'Don't do unto others as you would have them do unto you, their perceptions may be different.'

'Less than 5 per cent of people over retirement age are in need of special care. "Who will take care of our frail aged?" is the cry. What I observe is that most people taking care of the aged are the aged themselves.'

Our perceptions need not be bound by what the majority has always told us about their elders. Linda Burney, Chairperson of NSW Reconciliation Committee [in 1998], a woman of the Wiradjuri nation and a wonderful colleague in building the conflict-resolving community, writes:

> The role of elders in the Aboriginal community is very important and it's always struck me as a model for how all our senior people should be regarded, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, that is, the holders of knowledge, the vessels of wisdom, the keepers of the lore as tradition, the keepers of the law as legalities.
>
> Their positions are held with total respect. Their intelligence is respected, used and sought.
>
> Elders in the Aboriginal community gain that position through seniority, rites of passage. They are the heads of clans and organisations.
>
> The position of elder is reached and given because it is earned.
>
> At this time, with such social upheaval in Australia, the wisdom and the knowledge of all our elders, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, should be valued and used.

No stereotypes, please

My late mother, a magnificent woman who was born in York in Yorkshire, always quoted North Country wisdom: 'It's not so bad being poor as trying to pretend you are rich.' From this I have extrapolated: 'It's not so bad being old as trying to pretend you are young.'

If I feel it is in the least relevant, I tell people how old I am. I don't drag it into the conversation; no 'may I have the pumpkin soup and, by the way, I'm 78'.

I frequently state my age in order to de-stereotype attitudes. Now I have friends who believe that, over 39, it is *never* the right time to tell how old you are. To these good friends I reply: 'I tell to keep the mail down. It stops people sending me those beautiful brochures on abseiling.'

Our culture implants a plethora of stereotypes into our subconscious. Of course, we need to categorise in order to make sense of our world, to get on with living. But stereotypes are categories that have gone too far. Each one is unique and ours is the task to appreciate and applaud the diversity of all the ways in which we can age.

We need to compare this with other cultural diversity challenges and avoid stereotyping aged people just as we would avoid stereotyping of any group — by religion, race, politics or gender.

Enjoy the infinite variety, begin early and create your own unique mix; each — I quote from the Statement — a 'reflection of the infinitely rich and varied reality of God'. The elderly should be judged as individuals and not as members of a group. Not easy! How do we do this? By practice. By action. By allowing conscious (not subconscious) unprejudiced beliefs a chance to take over.

We need to start this preparation in the kindergarten. If we

are blessed, we will have inherited and absorbed positive visions of ageing from our families.

Most of us will want to grow old gracefully. Let us keep a wide range of tolerance for those who want to grow old disgracefully.

Although the elderly may well suffer from physical and financial restraints, maturity may have compensated them by a lack of competitiveness and any burning need to achieve. This 'letting go' can be an enormous blessing. It need not be a recipe for inactivity, but rather an opportunity to enjoy every step towards a goal, lightly held, just for itself.

When you're old you can give up any yearnings for perfection. Age gives one the option of seeing failure as a gift, an opportunity to learn, a new spur to creativity.

I have been moved to deep reflection on the words of the Statement on the attitude of acceptance, which I see, not as a passive, but a dynamically active, state.

> This wisdom that many old people possess is easier to recognise than it is to describe or to analyse. It can have many dimensions, from something as simple as a sense of humour to something as profound as serenity in the face of death. It seems to be characterised by an attitude of acceptance, an ability to be aware of variety and difference without being disturbed by it, an ability to welcome the inevitability of change while recognising that one may not be able to ride on its wave, an ability to accept one's mortality — not just the reality of death in the midst of life, but also the reality of weakness in the midst of strength, of failures in the midst of achievement, of regrets in the midst of satisfaction. It is a fundamental dimension of wisdom to be able to accept that this complex blending of positive and negative, of light and shade, is who we are, and to know that it is precisely this combination that constitutes our lives.

Consultation and communication

Let's contemplate this metaphor, from an ancient Jewish source:

> When one learns
> from the old
> one eats the grapes
> in their ripeness.

A dear friend of mine, Eve Higson, died about three years ago. She came very close to making a century. She wanted to. Although not an ardent monarchist, her wry sense of humour would have enjoyed her message of congratulations from the Queen. Eve was so valuable in my life, such a resource to me, because who else did I have in my mid-70s who treated me like a bright young thing with a great future ahead of her? This surely tells us that we need to look to the aged for mentoring, for inspiration, for holding the torch while we follow them down the path.

We are what we make of ourselves but we are also what others make of us. We live, we become thoroughly human in our relationships. How we behave towards another contributes significantly to who that other becomes, and I want to see us behaving towards our aged attentively, respectfully and caringly.

'We are what we make of ourselves but we are also what others make of us. We live, we become thoroughly human in our relationships.'

We need to design some new conversation. When asked 'What do you do?' in a world which treats the unemployed as invisible, do not answer 'I am retired'. Say 'I have completed my 35 years with the ANZ and now I play golf on Thursdays, can be reached at the Carers' Association all of Friday, and may not take your call on Monday to Wednesday because I am writing my memoirs.'

'Tikkun Olam' says that ancient Jewish injunction: 'go forth and heal the world'. My children grew up saying, 'Don't go near mother; she'll give you a job to do.' Here is a job for you — my dear children all, let us get together and re-design our rites of passage: more parties, visits, voyages, ceremonies, rituals, initiations, gifts received and offered, medals, citations, drama, dance and song. Let's have the growing old ball.

Consultation with the old can be very rewarding. Dr John Ward, geriatrician and NSW President of Health Professionals for Global Responsibility, one who certainly knows his oldies, writes me:

> My thesis is that the group most likely to lead us away from our ecocidal behaviour is older people. They are the only group with the time, the wisdom, the financial means and the incentive (they all have children, grandchildren or nephews/nieces).

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➢ Moreover, they have health, energy, technology, financial security and a long period of retirement. One possibility is that they may be the last cohort to grow older in a secure environment.

Older people have a responsibility to carry out this task for future generations as they have been responsible for the conditions into which future generations will be born.

Conflict resolution

Do you know how we describe older people involved in the conflict resolution process? It is conflict resolution in the 'sage stage' .

Yes, it may be that new skills need to be learned. It's not so hard for the old to admit that they are not computer literate. It may be harder to say 'I don't know if I'm so great on active listening'; 'I don't know if I'm up to the state of the art on turning opponents into partners'.

Conflict resolution awareness helps us to see conflict as opportunity. The years may bring us 'illness, isolation, grief or disappointment'. Let us seek the gifts within the turmoil.

However, here are results of research to gladden your heart: given the right circumstances it is no more difficult for elders to learn new skills than it is for juniors. Old age is a time to appreciate less diversion and more purposeful application.

Gender disparity

Demographic figures show there are increasingly more women than men from the age of 60 onwards. When you have been accustomed to having both significant men and women in your life, it is a great sadness to live in a world which the men have vacated. Many widows will never re-marry, as their potential partners have not survived. Many women, most from necessity, some from choice, will live alone, and they do that most successfully. Caroline Jones, in her most recent book *An Authentic Life*, writes about this with profound depth of perception.

This time of women spending the end of their lives in a community largely feminine is one which — to quote Caroline's beautiful phrase — will 'reward deeper reflection'.

Death and dying

The 'sage stage' is one of expanded consciousness. No comments on the aged, no comments on life would seem to me complete unless we visit the area of death and dying. Once again 'I get by with a little help from my friends'. I have turned to Dr Caroline Ralston, a member of a Buddhist community, who says:

> … the most significant and meaningful things in life are very simple and that for the large majority of us who are given the gift of older age, the time for reflection, serenity and completion, if we can remain involved and celebrate these simplicities there is no dying process there is only death which will have informed and given meaning to our lives.

'[G]iven the right circumstances it is no more difficult for elders to learn new skills than it is for juniors. Old age is a time to appreciate less diversion and more purposeful application.'

Caroline Ralston and I met when she was Head of the School of History, Philosophy and Politics at Macquarie University. We were trying to establish the Centre for Conflict Resolution and it was she who said 'Bring it into our department; it will suit us just fine'. You can see why I sought her aid and she researched for me a book by Kozan Ichigyo, a 14th century Zen monk. It is called *Graceful Exits* and I find the title alone a gift. In it Kozan Ichigyo wrote:

> Senior disciples assembled at his bedside as Zen master Taji approached death. One of them, remembering the master was fond of a certain kind of cake, had spent half a day searching the pastry shops of Tokyo for this confection, which he now presented to him. With a wan smile the dying master accepted a piece of the cake and slowly began munching it. As he grew weaker, his disciples inquired whether he had any final words for them. 'Yes', the master replied. The disciples leaned forward eagerly so as not to miss a word. 'Please tell us!' 'My, but this cake is delicious!' And with that he slipped away.

Death is not at odds with life but part of its very fabric. Let us acknowledge, esteem, praise and reward those who, in their later years, are living well and dying well.

The vision

In the conflict resolution network, we consult. I asked 13 people to contribute to this paper — probably the busiest 13 people in Sydney. Do you know how many responded? Thirteen.

The generous contributors to my preparation of this paper have not only shared their knowledge, they have shared their dreams. I hope I am an honest channel for these dreams. Their vision takes me into the three themes below.

Elders in the workplace

I have a vision of retirement age as being much more flexible than it is now, arrived at by consultation and a recognition of mutual responsibilities. I see retirement as only decided upon after it is clear that opportunities for retraining in placement, in part time work, in changing the nature of the working relationship to consultation or contracting, have been discussed in an atmosphere that recognises mutual responsibility.

I deplore that the elderly, as I deplore it for any age, are forced into that grave human rights injustice, the apartheid of the unemployed.

I see the whole of society attending to the physical and social wellbeing of the older worker. Then I believe they can be integrated into the workforce so that all are judged by how well they do the job, with age no longer the issue.

Elders in retirement

My vision is that this ➢

period of life be seen not with a look at the past — what you've retired from — but for all the potential of the present. This is a time when elders are respected, revered, consulted and integrated for the experience and wisdom they have gathered over the years, and have the time to polish and perfect right now. This is surely the time to gather the winter fruits; to collect the acknowledgments of sacrifices made and creativity contributed; to take the bows for survival and resilience.

While remembering that many will have had (and taken) the opportunity of creating their own financial independence, I see the financial needs of this group of citizens as being the happily accepted responsibility of all.

'My vision is that this period of life be seen not with a look at the past — what you've retired from — but for all the potential of the present. This is a time when elders are respected, revered, consulted and integrated for the experience and wisdom they have gathered over the years…'

Elders in need of care

I see this group — at present a small percentage — being even more reduced as the whole of society, from cradle to grave, become more conscious of healthy lifestyle.

For those in need of this special care, I see the rest of us providing it with a generosity which is the hallmark of the truly civil society.

I see the era where people are ageing confidently with increasing richness of life, and I commend to all of you the words from the statement: 'To have lived and loved and laboured in this world is not only a significant but a sacred achievement.' ●

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Clarification

The last edition of *The ADR Bulletin* carried an article by Shirli Kirschner entitled 'Preventing disputes at work: dealing with grief in the workplace'. This article was reprinted with kind permission from *Perspectives on Work* Vol 5 No1 (in press; copyright 2001) published by the Industrial Relations Research Association, Illinois, USA. ●

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