

**The Last “Ism”**

*Essay*

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On March 18, 2021, the UN released a report on global aging. Reading a summary of the report, I was reminded of Ken Dychtwald’s book, *Age Wave*. Dychtwald painted an amazing picture of the impact of global aging, particularly at its peak between 2030 and 2050. Similar to *Age Wave*, the UN report highlighted the growing contributions to societies and economies around the world through the working, spending, caregiving, volunteering, and creativity of older adults.

However, in 1989 when I read *Age Wave*, it was hard for me to imagine how such dramatic change would occur and who those older adults might be. After a little simple math, to paraphrase the immortal words of Pogo, “I saw the future and it was me!” Despite the mathematical accuracy, I simply could not comprehend that I would be 60 or 70 or 80 one day, let alone a force for change.

But time has little cat feet and creeps up on you silently and steadily. I have ridden the “age wave” along with my global co-horts as we have changed the world, celebrating the seemingly endless opportunities to be, do and create without regard to prescribed notions or definitions—to age as we want to age.

Unfortunately, personal experience and the UN report confirm a troubling reality of global aging. As much as some things change, one thing has remained—ageism. Viewed as the last acceptable “ism” and thought to be prevalent in as many as 1 in 2 people, damaging ageist stereotypes and intergenerational conflict were laid bare during the COVID-19 pandemic. Older

workers lost their jobs in greater numbers and remained unemployed longer. Access to healthcare and treatment decisions regarding older patients were negatively influenced. Ageist comments and hate speech, often reinforced by the media, led to older adults being blamed for lockdowns and labelled as burdens to society.

COVID-19 did not create ageism. It put it under a magnifying glass and allowed us to see the magnitude and impact of this “ism”. Ageism can be subtle and pervasive or brazen and insulting. It can stand alone or intersect with other “isms” of race, sex, or disability—feeding off one another, nourishing no one. We are confronted everyday with ageism. Television commercials with befuddled elders unable to use a smartphone. Candidates espousing arbitrary age limits for political office. Corporations with discriminatory hiring practices buried within AI-automated application and selection programs. It is easy to understand why older adults, myself included, feel devalued, invisible, irrelevant, and lacking any vital role to play in society when ageism is considered “normal” and not called out with the same vehemence as other “isms”.

If ageism is to end, we, the global agers, need to start changing the narrative. Instead of accepting and reflecting negative attitudes towards aging, we need to show the world, in the words of Betty Friedan, that “aging is not lost youth but a new stage of opportunity and strength.” Even more important than the message of growth, creativity and value of older adults is the need to stand up and be counted. Whenever we encounter a situation where we are being dismissed, overlooked, ignored or shunned due to our age—say something. Gray Panther Maggie Kuhn told people to “speak your mind even if your voice shakes” because “when you least expect it, someone may actually listen to what you have to say.”

Mine may be a single voice, but if it is added to millions of others, perhaps when the “age wave” crests the last acceptable “ism” will be swept away.