

Liberating Aging

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Maggie Kuhn was a woman far ahead of her time. She was both a visionary and a role model for young and old, attesting to our potential for strength, worth and beauty in the later years. I'm also honored to say that she was my friend and mentor.

In 1970, she co-founded the Gray Panthers after long, productive stints on the staffs of the YWCA and the national office of the United Presbyterian Church. Finding herself forcibly retired, bereft of her accustomed role and a sense of meaningful life involvement, she transformed into a brilliant, feisty, outspoken activist. Nicknamed "America's wrinkled radical," she unflinchingly challenged the "powers that be," from the U.S. Senate to the American Medical Association. She could be found espousing her views about the liberation of aging on everything from The Evening News to "Saturday Night Live" until she passed away at the ripe old age of 89 in 1995.

Several weeks ago, someone unearthed -- and sent to me -- the notes from an interview I had conducted with Kuhn back in 1978. As I re-read her prophecies, I was stunned both by her clarity of vision and the accuracy of her forecasts -- made nearly 35 years ago. Way before all of the current brouhaha about healthy aging, the third age, 50+ and the power of AARP, Kuhn laid out her prophetic blueprint for the world to come. In this exclusive two-part posting (the second part will appear tomorrow), I'm delighted to be able to share with you the essence of this grand woman's thinking about the unique role, challenge and purpose of aging. Enjoy!

Ken Dychtwald: Maggie, do you have any special feelings about growing old at this particular time in history?

Maggie Kuhn: This is indeed an age of liberation and self-determination. I'm glad to have reached seniority at this time. In fact, I believe that women and old people represent society's biggest untapped energy source. In my 70's, I am now feel free to speak out and act in ways that I was not able to when I was younger. I haven't dyed my hair and I can't afford a face lift. I enjoy my wrinkles which I regard as badges of distinction -- I've worked hard for them! I've come to believe that when you're young you have the face that God gave you, but when you get old you have the face you made yourself! Be proud of it.

Dychtwald: Are there any advantages to living a long life?

Kuhn: I guess that when I think about it, there are three things in particular that I like about getting old. First, you can speak your mind, as I certainly try to do, but you have to do your homework first; otherwise, you'll quickly be dismissed as a doddering old fool. The second thing I have liked about getting old is that I have successfully outlived a great deal of my opposition; many of the people who were my detractors are not around anymore! And then the third thing that I've especially liked about getting old is that it's really kind of a miracle to be able to tap into the incredible energy of the young, while making use of the knowledge and experience that comes after living a long, full life.

Dychtwald: Would you say some more about what you think the best roles would be for society's elders?

Kuhn: We who are older have enormous freedom to speak out, and equally great responsibility to take the risks that are needed to heal and humanize our sick society. We can try new things and take on entirely new roles. Let me describe them:

- Testers of new lifestyles: In old age, we don't have to compete. We do need desperately to cooperate, to live communally; to reach out to other human beings we never knew before. Our society worships bigness, numbers profits. I prefer to esteem smallness -- small groups caring for one another, small groups of activists taking on giants. Small can be beautiful.
- Builders of new coalitions: Age is indeed a universalizing factor, enabling us to close ranks among the young and old, black and white, rich and poor -- to form coalitions of power and shared humanity.
- Watchdogs and watchbitches of public bodies, guardians of public interest and the common good: Cadres of watchdogs can observe the courts, watch city councils and monitor the public and semi-public bodies where critical decisions are made, often hidden from public view.
- Advocates of consumers' rights and whistle-blowers on fraud, corruption and poor services: We need patient advocates in nursing homes, advocates for the hearing-impaired, advocates of elderly residents in retirement homes.
- Monitors of corporate power and responsibility: We can establish media watchers to monitor television and the press. We can organize protests in stockholders' meetings, reminding the multinational corporations of the ultimate ethical questions involved in their operations, the need to protect their workers' safety and the environment, etc.
- Healers of a sick society: We can use our weakness and disabilities as powerful social criticism and levers for change. I'm enormously struck with what antibodies in the human body do to combat disease and put down infection. I'd like to think of us as releasing healers - people working out of their own understanding, their own sense of history, their own freedom from some of the tyrannies of earlier years, to help heal a sick society in whatever way they can.
- Educators of the young: By our example and by our reaching out and sharing what we know. The experience and skills of old people should be valued and utilized. As elders, we should see ourselves as being particularly responsive to the needs and questionings of our younger friends and family. When we are kept apart from those who will live on after

us, we deprive ourselves and we also deprive the young; our society is correspondingly weaker because we have not lived together.

Dychtwald: It appears that many older people do a great deal of living in the past. What do you think of this?

Kuhn: I think that we -- the elders -- should be society's futurists. We ought to be doing future testing of new instruments, new technologies, concepts, ideas and styles of living. We have the freedom to do so - and we have little to lose.

Tomorrow: Maggie Kuhn debunks the myths of aging.

Note: The Gray Panthers began in 1970 when six elders who were forced to retire from national religious and social services organizations, decided to pool their efforts and help one another use their new freedom responsibly. The motto that the Gray Panthers chose was "Age and Youth in Action!" The course of action they determined for themselves was to use their knowledge and experience, their network of contacts and relationships, and their ample free time to work for broad-based social change. For more information about what the Gray Panthers are doing today - or to join their organization, visit: www.graypanthers.org

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