

We don't ask enough of seniors

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ANDY TEMPLETON, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

(First of two parts)

Happy New Year and congratulations! You will live longer, on average, than any human beings in history.

Chances are a combination of healthy diet, exercise, medical advancements and a technological society will keep you alive well into your 80s, at least.

But after years of striving to give people these additional years, some experts in the aging field are asking "from society's view, what is the purpose of aging and of retirement?"

I talked this over with Ken Dychtwald, author of "With Purpose: Going from Success to Significance in Work and in Life" and CEO of Age Wave. After 35 years as a consultant and observer of the aging field, as it's called, he agrees most of the scientific and social studies have focused on aging as a time of decline, isolation and disengagement.

"Did you know the dictionary defines 'retirement' as 'to disappear'?" he asks.

Dychtwald says with a quarter of the world's people about to be 60-plus, the purpose of aging "is lying right under the skin of the entire culture. We spent 100 years or so making 'old' people and now that we're doing a pretty good job of it, we realize we never asked 'what for?'"

"I believe that the faulty perspective is that old people are just supposed to have fun. You've raised the family, worked for years, so move to the sidelines, get out of the way, have fun."

That, Dychtwald tells me, only works when people die a few years after retirement, a common end in days of heavy work like farming and factory jobs. Today, work is not physical, for the most part, yet people continue to think 65 is "old."

"We've crafted a model that's coming back to haunt us," he says.

I agree. We aren't old at 65. Indeed, if we're honest, we identify old in terms of failing health.

We don't all age the same way or have the same motivations. We don't all want to volunteer our time in the hopes of making the world a better place. We have more wisdom, experience, perspective than we did in our youth but so what?

The world continues to believe "you can't teach an old dog new tricks."

Dychtwald agrees with me, to a point.

He believes there are three clear issues for people 60-plus.

There is the opportunity for personal growth. For turning from acquiring possessions, for example, to acquiring wisdom.

Then there is the role of the tribal elder, an idea that's been around since the beginning of time, he notes.

Finally, he takes issue with the attention given to entitlements for those over 65. Older people have become recipients, not contributors, to society, Dychtwald says.

"We ask very little of old people. Some volunteer, teach, mentor or give back in other ways. But, honestly, older people have the lowest volunteer rate of any group in the country. They contribute less to charity and humanitarian concerns."

This massive population of 60-plus Americans, for example, is in many ways one of our greatest natural resources, he says.

"Yet we expect very little of them. Little wonder a lot feel a sense of emptiness. They have many of life's answers, but no one asks them questions."

Coming next week: some solutions

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