

Growing Pain

Mirror, Mirror: The Terror of Not Being Young by Elissa Melamed, Ph.D.
Linden Press, Simon and Shuster, New York, New York 1983 220pp

A popular button on some lapels these days reads “Aging, aren’t we all?” Such symbols, along with the Grey Panthers, Senior Power and perhaps more professional gerontologists these days than elders themselves, might lead one to wonder whether yet another book about ageism is really needed anymore.

But, as my grandmother used to say (un-ironically at the time), ‘We should live so long.’

Mirror, Mirror is a well-written multi-faceted analysis of the subject that contains an abundance of information substantiating its need, even today. Its psychologist author reports that American women still spend \$6 million a day on skin care products alone, trying to inhibit and camouflage nature’s course.

Although being older in our youth oriented culture can be difficult for both men and women, appearing older—a large focus of the book—is more of a women’s issue, she contends,

Melamed, who has practiced psychoanalysis in San Francisco for 25 years, seems especially adept at exploring the many ways in which older women come to collaborate in their own annihilation. They are the largest single group taking psychoactive drugs. . They are the largest consumers of pulp romantic fiction and magazines in which older women hardly ever appear. Many still lie about their age, dye their hair to cover gray, imitate the young in fashions and tell themselves that they are only as old as they feel. Few have the guts of a Gloria Steinem who, when ‘complimented’ on not looking her age, deftly responded: “But this is exactly what 42 looks like.”

Quoting from a variety of literary, psychological and sociological sources, Melamed points to the institutional invalidation of many women’s experiences and talents as being responsible for the lack of self-esteem and withdrawal from active involvement in life that often characterizes being an older woman today. Women are considered to be ‘over the hill’ a good 20 years before men. “Despite the fact that women tend to live significantly longer than do men”, she writes, “a powerful and prevailing myth suggests that men age better than women. Women who have spent years raising children, creating crafts and running households are routinely discredited as never having ‘really’ worked.”

Qualities traditionally associated with being female are held in less regard today than before the Women’s Liberation movement, she argues. Younger women are in vogue these days when they forge headstrong into the cold, cruel, corporate world, clad in three-piece suits and other more invisible forms of masculine armor.

Precisely because it is older women who tend to be more adept at nurturing and experienced in more humane lifestyles, Melamed argues is her involvement in our currently cutthroat and threatened existence so urgently required.

“Cross cultural studies indicate that in many traditional societies the status of women rises dramatically after menopause.” We, on the other hand, she suggests, routinely neuter older women and deem them worthless. “They are yelled at by impatient bus drivers, traffic lights turn red before they can cross the street...and they are constantly reminded that only the young are entitled to full participation in society.”

The reason for such systemic battering of the elderly is as simple as it is profound: We are afraid of death and uncomfortable in the presence of those who remind us of our own mortality. Few of us are willing to acknowledge what Melamed quotes Berkeley psychologist Ken Dychwald as naming our “elder within” that recognition that we are all en route to death and the construction of images and beliefs about who we will become as we age.

Mirror, Mirror's greatest strength is perhaps in its author's optimistic encouragement of older women to reinvolve themselves in community life and literally save the world:

“Older women’s vision of the personal—of each child, each living thing as valuable—is also the ultimate political vision for the nuclear age. It is no longer possible to make a separation between healing ourselves and helping others. In fact, the very survival of human life may depend upon mature women laying claim to the power they have been denied.”