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## The Forgotten "-ism"

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# The Forgotten "-ism"

## **Abstract**

*"I'd rather not. I don't like to talk to old people. They make me uncomfortable. They kind of smell weird and make me think about death. Some of them are even racist, so I'd just rather not."*

As part of my internship this summer, in which I helped to coordinate the Friday evening dinners at the Gettysburg Senior Center, putting out advertisements to "hang out with old people" wasn't exactly an easy task. [excerpt]

## **Keywords**

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, senior citizens, elderly, ageism

## **Disciplines**

Civic and Community Engagement | Community-Based Learning | Family, Life Course, and Society | Gerontology | Sociology

## **Comments**

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](https://cupola.gettysburg.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](https://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

# SURGE

[ VERB ] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

## THE FORGOTTEN “-ISM”

August 7, 2013

*“I’d rather not. I don’t like to talk to old people. They make me uncomfortable. They kind of smell weird and make me think about death. Some of them are even racist, so I’d just rather not.”*



As part of my internship this summer, in which I helped to coordinate the Friday evening dinners at the Gettysburg Senior Center, putting out advertisements to “hang out with old people” wasn’t exactly an easy task.

Among the college students and people my age who I invited, responses like the one you see above were rare, however they did happen on more than one occasion. At first, I tried to take such comments with a grain of salt, but I just couldn’t get past how these stereotypes of the elderly could pass as acceptable, casual conversation. If someone gave such frank, insensitive reasons for not attending [ESL classes for Casa de la Cultura](#) or [Circles at SCCAP](#), one could easily launch into a tirade about racism or the culture of poverty in the US.

Why is it then, when we openly condemn classism, racism, sexism, and most other –isms, many continue to overlook the discriminations made on the basis of a person’s age?

I’d bet that most people don’t have a clear image of what ageism in our society looks like, considering that for every case of elder abuse that agencies know about, there are [24 that haven’t been reported](#).

Even from my own experiences this summer as a Heston intern, I’ve seen first-hand the impact of neglect on older residents here in Adams County who have little contact with friends or family. I’ve gone on the Meals on Wheels routes and have met plenty of seniors who are confined to their homes (many to their chairs, even) because of physical disabilities or mental ones, like dementia.

I do recognize that actual verbal or physical abuse of an older person and merely not wanting to talk to one are not the same thing; however, I think that both people—the abuser and the non-talker—belong to the same culture of prejudice and discrimination. Such a culture that undervalues its elderly could exist for several reasons:

- Our consumer lifestyles drive us to desire what’s new and exciting; what’s old and outdated can be discarded or replaced.
- We lead fast-lives with fast technologies; older folks just move too slowly for us.
- We value productivity in our economy; the less you can do, the less you are worth.

- And, we are highly individualistic. As a general trend in the United States, community-based agents of socialization, like family or religion, play comparatively less of a role in people's lives today than they did in the past.

I don't know exactly what compels those who actively make a point to avoid the elderly—maybe a bad relationship with grandparents? Who knows. However, I can tell you that after many conversations I've had this summer—from Friday night dinners, Meals on Wheels routes, and games of bingo—that speaking with senior citizens can be more than just some obligation that you owe to your grandparents. As a culture, I think we need to break apart those myths that keep us estranged to the elderly and stuck in our habits of prejudice.

A conversation goes a long way, and it can actually improve the length and quality of life. For the seniors who go to the Gettysburg Senior Center for dinner, a positive experience (a warm meal and a good conversation with a college student) may make them more receptive to returning again in the future. The friends they make with younger people and with other seniors help to keep their minds sharp and their spirits high. More strategically, they become better connected to the [ACOFA's](#) other services for its clients. All of this helps the Office for the Aging achieve its mission: to allow seniors to age comfortably in their homes for as long as possible.

Remember: you will one day be a person of old age as well. In that time, what would make you feel that you'll be able to age comfortably? Everyone's different; however, contact with family and friends is often highly regarded. The argument that would likely come to many of our minds—that “we should be kind to the elderly because one day we will be older and will want others to be kind to us”—makes sense in some ways, but it does have holes in it. That's simply because it's not a guarantee; rather, it's a leap of good faith in others.

Do we really owe anything to older generations? On the flipside, do we really owe anything to younger, unborn generations? These questions get at the philosophical underpinnings of political scientists and environmentalists. Bruce Hull, a political scientist from Virginia Tech University, explains that obligations in contemporary society are based on a social contract of reciprocity; therefore, unless we regard the past and future generations as a part of our moral community, we feel that we do not owe anything to them, because they offer nothing in return.

Is that legitimate? The alternate view would hold that parent generations allow their offspring to sustain themselves. We benefit from the opportunities that are passed on to us – environmental resources, technologies, human institutions, political stability, etc. So, do we owe respect or kindness in return?

These are tough questions to answer; however what we do know is that older people have always been, and – increasingly as the Baby Boomer generation approaches retirement age –will continue to be a part of our society. What should our responses to them be? Neglect? Hostility?

I'd say, practice compassion instead, even if that entails some growing pains. It's outside our comfort zones (not within them) that we learn how to be the kind of person we want to be. When we will ourselves to speak to older people, we are changing more than just their lives; we are also changing ourselves and learning how to be more understanding. That's an effort I think is worth making. So, give it a chance. Talk to an elderly person.

Here's a start: “Hi, how are you? How was your day?” A conversation can truly make a world of difference.

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<http://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com/2013/08/07/the-forgotten-ism/>