

Gravel Roads and Grey Hair

Oct. 2015

By Helen Hinchliff

“You don’t look like a person who drives on gravel roads,” he said as Cranberry Road suddenly deteriorated only a couple hundred metres from where I’d picked him up.

I was on my way to the Centre for Loving Inquiry, founded by Ahava Shira and located on Wright Road; he was headed for the top of Mount Maxwell.

Having already pondered questions of perception at the Centre with my loving, inquiring sisters, I couldn’t help wondering what this backpacker saw in me that led to his gravel road pronouncement. Was it my preppy, well-tailored shirt, recently purchased as new from the Lady Minto Thrift Shop that might have suggested a city girl who prefers pavement to gravel? Or did my grey hair imply a fearful old lady unaccountably indulging in risk-taking behaviour?

And what, by the way, was I seeing in him that suggested to me he was a bit wet behind the ears? Was it his brand new backpack; his hope of hitching a ride to the top of Mt. Maxwell on a Sunday afternoon during the off season; or merely his youthful appearance?

With all these guesses going on, one wonders how any successful communication can occur between the generations.

How we view each other based on our assumptions about age is no idle question. A recent survey accessed at www.academia.edu concludes that ageism is not only prevalent in modern society, it is increasing. With respect to how younger people perceive the elderly, author Christine Apte reports from a summary of the literature, ageism is “one of the most chronic and pervasive forms of prejudice” in the United States. Not only does it lead to the conclusion that older persons are “sick, depressive, and underproductive,” but it also leads to anxiety in younger perceivers regarding their own futures. Sooner or later they’ll be joining the ranks of those against whom they are prejudiced.

Oh dear!

People often deal with this inherent contradiction through denial. Some try to appear younger by colouring their grey hair, by smoothing on anti-wrinkle cream, or by undergoing Botox injections and face lifts. Or they say, “Maybe others will grow older, but it won’t happen to me.” Such thinking can lead to over-doing it:—“I can climb up on that roof”; “I can jaywalk in traffic”; “I can shovel heavy snow.” I’ve said all those things in recent times.

But mostly we ignore “the problem” by avoiding older people. We don’t want to know anything about what it’s like to grow older until—lo and behold!—we’re there.

Boomer Spoiler Alert: a recent study commissioned by the British Department for Work and Pensions found that respondents thought “youth” ends at age 41 and “old age” begins at 59.

The only solution, in my view, is to embrace oneself and the process. It’s like the dilapidated fence surrounding the property I bought on Desmond Crescent back in 1999. I told the contractor I wanted it replaced immediately. Too busy with the home renovations I wanted done even sooner, Ken replied, “That old fence has a few more years left in it. Let it be.” Over the ensuing fifteen years, three sides did have to be replaced (think knees and hips), but one side is still standing. Over the years, a wisteria vine took over the job of holding it up, and every spring it provides the bonus of a splashy floral display. I didn’t want to take out the wisteria, so I embraced the old fence, hanging weather beaten signs on it that I bought at the Saturday Market. I wouldn’t be surprised if the one exclaiming, “And I think to myself what a wonderful world!” helped to sell the property. That sign certainly received compliments galore and even a request from the Fed Ex deliveryman to take a photograph.

So as I enter the last quarter of my life, I am emboldened to welcome whatever engaging comes my way. This year it has been Ahava’s “Year to Love” series of retreats in which we are invited to explore the roadblocks we each have placed in our paths that can impede the full enjoyment of our lives. We have expressed our inquiries in a variety of art forms, culminating in a show we are hosting in the Art Spring Gallery from November 6 through 11. Called “Pieces of Her Story,” we each are finding ways to crash through our self-imposed barriers, perhaps risking a bruise or a scrape in the process.

Over the course of my life, I have often said to myself, “I’m a person who can’t . . .” Now I’m learning to say, “I’m a person who can . . .” Forget the grey hair; bring on the gravel roads. Life is a marvellous journey. Bon voyage!