Working to Disarm Women’s Anti-Aging Demon

**By ASHTON APPLEWHITE**OCT. 10, 2017

A couple of years ago I had a light bulb moment. So many women color their hair to cover the gray. Many resent the effort and expense, and it’s a major way in which we make ourselves invisible as older women. When a group is invisible, so are the issues that affect it. Suppose the world saw how many we are, and how beautiful, I mused. Suppose we morphed together, in solidarity: the Year of Letting Our Hair Go Gray! It would be transformative!

I posted the idea on my [This Chair Rocks Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/ThisChairRocks). I got a ton of blowback. I deserved it. “You go first,” was one notable comment, so I did, bleaching my whole head. (I keep part of it white, partly as an age-solidarity dye job and partly because I figure no one believes the brown is real.) Mainly I learned an important lesson: Who was I to be telling women how they should look or what they should do? To each her own. We each have to age in our own way on whatever terms work for us.

One thing we can all agree on, though? Aging is harder for women. We bear the brunt of the equation of beauty with youth and youth with power — the double-whammy of ageism and sexism. How do we cope? We splurge on anti-aging products. We fudge or lie about our age. We diet, we exercise, we get plumped and lifted and tucked.

These can be very effective strategies, and I completely understand why so many of us engage in them. No judgment, I swear. But trying to pass for younger is like a gay person trying to pass for straight or a person of color for white. These behaviors are rooted in shame over something that shouldn’t be shameful. And they give a pass to the underlying discrimination that makes them necessary.

Appearance matters. Adornment pleases. But society’s obsession with the way women look is less about beauty than about obedience to a punishing external standard — and power. When women compete to “stay young,” we collude in our own disempowerment. When we rank other women by age, we reinforce ageism, sexism, lookism and patriarchy. What else we can we all agree on? This is one bad bargain. It sets us up to fail. It pits us against one another. It’s why the poorest of the poor, around the world, are old women of color.



Ashton Applewhite urges women to join forces against ageism the way they mobilized against sexism in the 1960s and ’70s. CreditTED

What’s a girl to do? Join forces against ageism the way we mobilized against sexism in the 1960s and ‘70s. For movements to have power, their members have to embrace the thing that is stigmatized, whether it’s being black, loving someone of the same sex, or growing old. That means moving from denying aging to accepting it, and even to embracing it.

It’s a big ask. Open any women’s magazine and a hundred advertisements bellow, “How can you expect to be desired if you ‘let yourself go?’” None of that stigma is “natural,” none of it is fixed, and change is underway. In August, [Allure magazine](https://www.allure.com/story/allure-magazine-phasing-out-the-word-anti-aging) banned the term “anti-aging” from its pages, commending instead “the long-awaited, utterly necessary celebration of growing into your own skin — wrinkles and all.” If this mainstay of the beauty industry can do it, so can we: change how we look at ourselves and one another and value what we see.

Some places to start:

**TAP INTO WHAT WE KNOW: GETTING OLDER ENRICHES US**

Who really thinks that she is a lesser version — less interesting, less fun in bed, less valuable — than the woman she used be? If so, where do those messages come from, and what purpose do they serve? Of course aging brings wrenching losses, but it also confers authenticity, confidence, perspective, self-awareness (and my mother said her legs got better). Priorities are clearer. It’s easier to manage emotions. We want less. We care less about what people think, which is really liberating. For many women, late life is the best time of all.

**LEARN TO LOOK MORE GENEROUSLY AT ONE ANOTHER AND OURSELVES** Instead of muttering “What the hell happened?” at the face in the mirror, how about taking a minute to recall some of the things that did happen, and how remarkable a lot of them were? That crease between nose and lip? The actress Frances McDormand grins as she credits her son, Pedro, for the one on the left side of her face, etched by 20 years of saying “Wow!” or “Oh my God.” Calling her face a map, she rejects the surgery that would erase her history. Dissatisfaction sustains the multibillion-dollar skin care and weight loss industries. Confidence is an aphrodisiac. Which of your friends are sexually active? Not the prettiest or the thinnest or the youngest, but the ones who know their lovers are lucky.

**REJECT OLD-VERSUS-YOUNG-WAYS OF THINKING** Prejudices pit us against one another, like moms who work outside the home arguing with stay-at-home moms about who’s a better parent, instead of joining forces to close the wage gap. One reason women compete so fiercely in the workplace is that it seems as if only a few positions are open to us. That’s not a too-many-women problem, it’s a too-few-slots-because-of-gender-and-racial-bias problem. Zero-sum thinking not only maintains power structures, it also makes it harder to be generous and open-minded.

**COME TOGETHER AT ALL AGES AND TALK ABOUT THIS STUFF** As is, each generation has to figure out on its own how futile and harmful it is to fear aging. How much of our youth do we squander worrying about not being young any more? Why do we buy into the notion that our so-called prime evaporates along with our reproductive usefulness — if not before — despite all the evidence to the contrary? Having friends of all ages makes it easier to step off the hamster wheel of age denial, share power, and think and act in pro-aging ways.

We have a choice: we can keep digging the hole deeper, or we can throw away the damn shovel. We can move, if we have the will and the desire and the vision, from competing to collaborating. We can turn it from a conversation about scarcity and loss to one about empowerment and equity. And we can take that change out into the world. The women’s movement taught us to claim our power; a pro-aging movement will teach us to hold onto it.

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