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Turning the Tide on the “Silver Tsunami”

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As we all know, there are those who profit from social prejudice such as racism, sexism, and homophobia and thus have a vested interest in keeping that prejudice alive. Their method of choice is to instill fear in us by insisting that our economy will suffer and our social fabric will fray if we give ourselves permission to tolerate and even welcome the dangerous “others” in our midst.

Ageism — which has certainly been around a long time — is not immune to such fear-mongering. In fact, one of the latest tactics to keep it going is the use of the image of a “silver tsunami” to describe the **arrival** into older adulthood of the huge Baby Boomer generation of about 77 million people born between 1946 and 1964.

It is a fact that about 10,000 Boomers turn 65 each day and will do so for the next 14 years. To many Americans, this is cause for alarm because they wonder about the solvency of Social Security and Medicare. They also wonder how many people of this generation have been negatively impacted by the economic crash of 2008 and are choosing not to retire primarily because they can't afford to. They see this as a threat to younger generations taking their place in the workforce and moving up in it.

But there's a real problem with equating the increasing growth of an older population with the effect of a tsunami. Two problems, in fact: one geological and the other gerontological.

Let's start with the geological problem. According to the **National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**, “A tsunami is a series of ocean waves generated by sudden displacements in the sea floor, landslides, or volcanic activity.” The key here is the phrase “sudden displacements.” The earth's surface shifts without warning, triggering a disturbance of far-reaching, catastrophic proportions.

This sudden change doesn't apply to the Baby Boom generation. Our population has slowly been absorbing its 65-year-olds into elderhood since 2011. If it seems sudden, it's only because we as a society have closed our collective eyes to this gradual trend and have done little or nothing to prepare for it.

As for the gerontological problem, the fear-mongering is far more insidious when ageism is no longer just a numbers game in which older adults are assumed to be an economic drain. Instead, when ageism is turned into a moral crusade it advocates that older adults (who, of course, must be needy because they are also in impending physical and cognitive decline!) be placed somewhere apart from the general younger population to be “taken care of” and leave everyone else to the productive business of life.

For the benefit of all generations, our society must rid itself of the cultural myopia that sees aging solely in terms of deficit. It’s time we turn the tide on the silver tsunami myth and find a different metaphor, one that accurately reflects the huge assets older adults bring to all aspects of life.

In other words, how about a “silver reservoir”?

For what is a reservoir, anyway, but a place that stores water (an essential element of life) for the purpose of supplying it to a community? The water comes from mountain streams and rivers, usually across great distances and accumulated over time. The water is used for drinking, washing, bathing, running power sources, maintaining manufacturing processes, irrigating crops, and turning barren soil to productive farmland.



It’s not a real stretch of the imagination to see how the accumulation of a large older adult population is a huge potential resource for good in our

society rather than an impending danger that threatens to wipe everyone out.

Granted, the image of a reservoir is not as sexy or exciting as that of a tsunami, but it could be. Imagine opening up to elders the floodgates of opportunity so wide that the energy and power of all that pent-up wisdom and experience inundate society, creating new businesses that hire millions of young people; offering innovative, multi-perspective solutions to longstanding social problems; and providing multitudes of volunteers for nonprofit causes.

Let’s erase from our social lexicon the ageist image of a silver tsunami, gently correcting others who use it. Let’s replace it with the metaphor of a vital and inexhaustible resource, and offer this life-affirming — and accurate — picture of how, by transcending aging, we can transform society.

Let’s turn a destructive tidal wave into an exhilarating wave of the future all generations can ride.

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