

Old Age as Opportunity for Inner Growth

May I suggest that human beings' potential for change and growth is much greater than we are willing to admit and that old age be regarded not as the age of stagnation but as *the age of opportunities for inner growth*? Old people must not be treated as patients, nor regard their retirement as a prolonged state of resignation.

The years of old age may enable us to attain the high values we failed to sense, the insights we have missed, the wisdom we ignored. They are indeed formative years, rich in possibilities to unlearn the follies of a lifetime, to see through inbred self-deceptions, to deepen understanding and compassion, to widen the horizon of honesty, to refine the sense of fairness.

One ought to enter old age the way one enters the senior year at a university, in exciting anticipation of consummation. Rich in perspective, experienced in failure, people advanced in years are capable of shedding prejudices and the fever of vested interests. They do not see anymore in every fellow human a person who stands in their way, and competitiveness may cease to be their way of thinking.

We must seek ways to overcome the traumatic fear of being old, the prejudice, the discrimination against those advanced in years. All human beings are created equal, including those advanced in years. Being old is not necessarily the same as being stale. The effort to restore the dignity of old age will depend on our ability to revive the equation of old age and wisdom. Wisdom is the substance upon which the inner security of the old will forever depend. But the attainment of wisdom is the work of a life time.

Abraham Joshua Heschel
(1961)