



## READING THE LABELS

What is it with perceptions of age? Everywhere I look there seems to be another headline exclaiming over an ‘elderly’ person in their sixties – or even, heaven forbid, fifties.

Rarely heralding anything positive, the banner usually involves an incident where someone fell over or ran off the road. Events that could, of course, never happen at any other stage of life.

I’m declaring a rant here. Most of us are averse to some words or phrases and the way we talk about age is one of my major bugbears. Yet we are all ageing, if we are lucky. In a diverse world where minority groups are seen as others, ageing is the one category we all share. There are loads of ways in which we describe ageing and few are complimentary. At a time when we are living longer and better lives, the barometer is stuck on labels that are outdated and irrelevant.

So what is it about the word ‘elderly’ that rankles so much? Actually it’s those last two letters that make all the difference. The -ly loads connotations of weakness, frailty and burden. Without that small addition, we become elders, still relevant with wisdom, dignity and contribution yet to be made.

Is it, as Hamlet said, that my ‘thinking makes it so’? Perhaps, but perception is indeed everything, and when the word elderly appears, so does yet another misconception of age.

The labels are as just pernicious whatever age you are. Expectations of ability start early, with comparisons of babies. Who is sleeping / feeding / growing? Who is walking / passing milestones? They get to school and we ask how reading is going. It seems we are constantly looking for signs that reinforce brilliance. Comparisons that flip easily from encouragement to do our best, into blame for not measuring up.

And it doesn’t stop there. In fact it never seems to end, as society rests upon making one person right and another wrong, setting one to succeed while another fails. From schools to courts, from job interviews to relationships. Sitting in judgment is our human default. While ready to judge others, none of us want to be that one who is lesser.

We are our own worst enemy when it comes to the language of ageing. It’s common to blame a senior moment when the car keys are misplaced, or groan about getting old when knees

creak. Yet we lose the car keys just as easily at 30 and my young gym-bunny friend often has knee pain. Overwhelm and over-use are human conditions, not just age-related ailments.

Language is our way of defining, confining and refining who we are, but as we live longer and better lives, there needs to be a change in the way age is described. So it was with much amusement, I recently discovered that the World Health Organisation has changed its age categories to describe 18-65 year olds as ‘youth/young people’, and 66-79 year olds as ‘middle-aged’. Some of the language is still unhelpful, with 0-17 year olds regarded as ‘underage’ and 80-99 as ‘elderly’. When you get to 100+ years old, WHO now says you are ‘long-lived elderly.’

In a recent conversation with a bunch of 50 pluses, there was a strong sense that the only way to redefine an age is to live a new meaning into it. After all, we’re increasingly likely to live to 100 and beyond.

If 50 is indeed halfway through our lives, then what does that really mean? Is it the top of the hill (or bell-curve) that means down is the only option? In a society obsessed with the culture of youth, even the milestones of growing up suggest that decline is the only remaining option.

What if we regard age as a complex linear path, with twists and turns at every stage? Would the number be relevant? Would, instead it be more useful to see ourselves through the lens of what we can offer? A view of contribution, rather than deficit?

How different would life be, if you chose to live as an elder, rather than elderly.

As my next milestone birthday approaches, it brings an air of excitement for all the possibilities that were not open to me in the last decade. Circumstances have changed and so have I. No label will define or reduce that, unless I let it. And that will never happen.

Jenny Magee works with Boomers to make the most of the second half of their lives. Her latest book **A Bold Life – How Boomer Women are Reinventing Life Beyond Fifty** is available at good bookstores or from [www.jennymagee.com](http://www.jennymagee.com) If you are looking to make significant changes, contact **Jenny** via email to [jenny@jennymagee.com](mailto:jenny@jennymagee.com)

