

The Presumption of Decrepitude

As we all know, there is under the law a presumption of innocence, from which we as citizens greatly benefit. But in recent years I have begun to discover a rather different presumption, not sanctioned by the law but clearly at work in numerous situations. It is a presumption applied to people of a certain age, regardless of their actual capacities. It is the presumption of decrepitude.

Let me be precise about the age. I don't believe that people in their sixties are generally subjected to the kind of treatment that I will be talking about. Nowadays sixty is not considered terribly old. Hillary Clinton, George W. Bush, and Joe Biden are all in their sixties, as are Mick Jagger and Bruce Springsteen. None of these are considered past their prime, even though they are all eligible to have lunch at the local senior center.

I am talking about seventy and beyond. This is the cohort to which I belong. There is an assumption, seldom articulated but often in evidence, that people in this age-group are beginning to be physically infirm and mentally challenged; that they are very likely persons in need of assistance, or even of supervision.

Let me give you two examples. First, in my spare time I am a hiker. One day I was coming up Bells Mill Road into Roxborough after a walk of several miles. I was nearing Ridge Avenue, at which point I was planning to terminate the hike and board a bus. However, a lady standing by one of the houses called out to me. She said: "EXCUSE ME, SIR. WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" Her tone was the same that she would use if she thought I was committing a felony. I tried to explain that I was hiking. She replied that this behavior was totally inappropriate for a person of my age, and she threatened to call either an ambulance or the police. I finally persuaded her to let me pass, since I was planning to terminate the hike on Ridge Avenue. Given this mitigating circumstance, she decided to show clemency. But it was a very ugly, embarrassing confrontation, and for the next year I avoided Bells Mill Road entirely. Finally I decided that I should not let such attitudes govern my behavior, and I am using Bells Mill Road again. If that woman should challenge me, I will forcefully express my displeasure.

The second example is from the world of every day. I do the shopping for my household. As I pass through the market, I may stop at a particular section and pause. I will be asking myself, "Do we need paper towels?" This is very common behavior; most of us do it all the time, unless we are unusually well organized. But there is an employee at the market who repeatedly asks me, "Are you all right over there?" He asks this even though I have been coming there for years, have never caused any trouble, and have never sneaked out without paying, much as I may have wanted to. The problem here is the repetitive nature of the employee's questioning. Has he not learned that I pose no danger to the market, or to him, or to myself? I am tempted either to lash out in anger or to avoid the market altogether by shopping online.

But a word about shopping online. To some, it may seem like a step forward.

“Welcome to the twenty-first century,” as people like to say. But shopping online would eliminate the human interaction, the first-hand inspection of the merchandise, and the exercise that my trip to the market entails. I don’t own a car, and I use one of those hand-drawn carts as I walk back and forth to the market. On the way home, in the nicer weather, I encounter a group of vegetarians who regularly hold an outdoor potluck supper. They offer me a tofu burger as I pass by, and I join them for a while in conversation. I would not want to give all this up. I value the exercise, the direct involvement in shopping, the human interaction, and even the tofu burger. A shift to the new technology would leave me isolated and sedentary.

You can probably tell that I am a New Yorker. We New Yorkers share a love of walking and a dislike of the automobile. In our home town, we walk and we use public transit; that’s just the way it is. Many Europeans do the same. At various times I have lived in places where it was necessary to own a car, but when I came to Philadelphia, I reverted to the New York lifestyle. Walking has always been my favorite exercise, and it has always seemed quite natural—which of course it is. It’s something that you don’t have to think about; you just do it. And if you don’t own a car, you’ll have plenty of opportunities—trust me.

It also appears that walking is a form of exercise that transitions well into old age. It is not a tremendous assault on the body. I have not had to cut back very much from what I was doing twenty years ago. I say all this by way of explaining that I am not doing anything very different now from what I have always done. But suddenly my behavior seems to be arousing alarm in various quarters.

These matters came to a head one day last October. I was walking along Ridge Avenue in Roxborough at the end of a long hike. It was turning cooler, so I stopped, took off my backpack, and pulled out a light jacket. I believe that any outdoor person would have understood what I was doing. But to one onlooker, apparently, my actions signaled some kind of difficulty. He came up behind me and asked, “Are you all right?”

He caught me by surprise and my reaction was totally unplanned. I exploded. I let out a stream of invective such as you would not believe. I was using words that I didn’t even realize I knew. I never dreamed that I could be that gross! The poor man fled in haste.

As you can imagine, this incident left me shaken. I was not prepared for the intensity of my reaction. To the man who surprised me that day, I must apologize for my language. In the future, I will strive to express myself more elegantly, with a renewed emphasis on dignity and decorum.

But in the final analysis, I would not deny all validity to the anger. The automatic assumption that older people are in need of assistance can be destructive. It can undermine the independence of those who are still energetic. As an older person myself, I can attest that it is all too easy for us to acquiesce. We can so easily allow others to do for us, to care for us, to supervise us, and to deter us from spirited activity. For those of us who *are* energetic, this can lead to an immediate, even catastrophic decline.

But it is a delicate matter, because there are people with Alzheimer's and other serious infirmities who clearly need looking after. I am only saying that we should not routinely assume that strenuous activity is out-of-bounds for senior citizens. When a man is walking up Bells Mill Road, we should not immediately call the police. Perhaps, instead, we should applaud. Or perhaps we should just leave the man alone. Each case must be judged on its own merits, but let there not be an automatic presumption of decrepitude.

And now for the nitty-gritty. What I say today has little importance in and of itself. I belong to a small generation—the children of the Depression—and relatively few of us are physically active. We are a minority within a minority.

But ten years behind us, and seventy-four million strong, come the Baby Boomers, the largest single demographic group within our population. The issues that I have been raising will take on a huge importance as the Boomers grow older. I see three major problems here.

First of all, the Baby Boomers have never wanted to be considered old. Their very name underscores their attachment to youth. We rarely see them at senior centers. And the Senior ID, which my generation regards as the ultimate status symbol, is anathema to the Boomers. If you ever see a Boomer wearing a Senior ID, you can be sure that you're hallucinating. How, then, is your typical Boomer going to react when someone says, "Hey, Pops, let me help you across the street!" or "Are you all right over there, old-timer?" We need to be prepared for this before it begins to happen.

Secondly, the Boomers have put a much greater emphasis on physical fitness. They will be doing things that younger people may find alarming. Here again, we need to be prepared.

And finally, the Boomers seem to feel less attachment to those traditions of propriety and restraint that guided earlier generations. If the Boomers explode, it could get really ugly. To be honest, I myself set an abysmal example on that afternoon in October; so it is not for the pot to call the kettle black! But still, the confrontations could get ugly. My own outburst was ugly as well.

Thus it is in our interest to begin dealing with these issues now. We really need to rethink what it means to be a senior citizen. Our vision of seniors should be broad enough to include those who are alert and alive as well as those who are inert and incompetent. And we should also make provision for those who fall somewhere in between. When people need help, we should help them. But when they are vigorous, let us by all means encourage them to remain so, instead of trying to rein them in!

Prepared by Eric Saunders for presentation at the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration in Mount Airy, Philadelphia