

OUR YUMMIEST, MOST FEEL-GOOD ISSUE YET

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Secrets of the Blue Zones:
HOW TO LIVE TO 100

Inside:

**INDULGE LIKE
A PARISIAN**

p.50



**TOP
WELLNESS
RESORTS**

p.30



GOOD, OLD-FASHIONED

Ageism

You stand against racism, sexism, speciesism ... but what about ageism? In a world obsessed with youth, the unconscious ways in which we treat those with more life experience can often go overlooked. We delve into the animal-rights movement to explore how ageism rears its ugly head in a space where the ultimate goal of compassion for all can sometimes come up short.

BY MARLA ROSE

When I first started my animal activism in Chicago during the 1990s, there was always a group of fellow activists who were reliably at every protest and event. No advocacy gathering was complete without them. This core group was comprised of women in their 60s and upward, always donning the official vegan footwear (canvas shoes), sporting coats festooned with buttons bearing animal-rights slogans, and hands full of literature to try to make the world a more compassionate place.

The women, whom I referred to in my mind as The Gray Brigade, were longtime friends who shared histories and passions, and they were happy to mentor younger activists like me, seeming to also benefit from our enthusiasm. They also easily outnumbered those of us in our 20s and 30s. These pioneers were the early guides who taught me virtually everything I needed to know about transitioning from a vegetarian to a vegan in the 1990s:



the best cookbooks, the best restaurants, how to order a meal without animal ingredients, where to buy shoes, what to avoid, how to respond to rude comments. They were an indispensable resource for all the new vegans and activists.

In hindsight, though, I cringe thinking about some of my attitudes toward these women, namely the one that blended them together. Referring to them, even just in my mind, as The Gray Brigade—and the lazy stereotyping that lumped them all in together like they were a monolith without distinction between individuals—was condescending and deeply diminishing of them. It was also an attitude that was harmful; of course they were distinct from one another. One woman was a Holocaust survivor and a former fashion designer, always effortlessly chic. Another was a nurturer who made sure we were warm enough at our winter protests, but would fearlessly stand up to anyone who harassed us. A third's tiny stature belied her indomitable energy and tireless voice for the animals. They were individuals who did not look alike, and who had unique personalities, backgrounds, and skills. But my internalized ageism smashed them together in my mind into a quaint but featureless blob.

Ageism is stereotyping and discrimination on the basis of a person's age. And while younger people can certainly face biases that unfairly hinder them due to their age, in a society that's so dogmatic about chasing “the fountain of youth” and staving off the inevitable effects of aging, generally older people are the ones most harmed by ageism.

At its worst, ageism is another form of bigotry—one that we internalize in our youth-obsessed culture and externalize in the form of biases and discrimination. With every expression of bigotry, there are also casualties. Ageism presents itself in many aspects of society, and the vegan world is not immune to it.

DISCRIMINATION: DOUBLED, TRIPLED, AND BEYOND

Michele Simon, longtime food-policy expert, attorney, and founder of the Plant Based Foods Association, has seen how ageism and other forms of discrimination play out in both the vegan business world and the nonprofit sector. So much so that professionally, she is now focused on workplace discrimination and related abuses. Her own experiences have fueled her passion as an advocate and voice for other survivors, and, in recent years, Simon has personally experienced how gendered ageism has worked against her professionally.

“I started a very successful business network after a long career in advocacy, but have found consulting to be challenging. I'm 58,” she says matter-of-factly. “I am at the top of my game and have never been more confident in my abilities to contribute. And I know many other women in my age group with similar experiences. The vegan ‘boys club,’ which hoards funding, also contributes to discrimination in the field more widely.”

She is not alone or imagining things. In a survey published by the *Harvard Business Review*, it was found that many women suffered professionally from age bias no matter their

age—they were always somehow not right for career advancements. They were either patronized as too young (and thus inexperienced), too middle aged (and thus distracted with family responsibilities), or too old (and thus out of touch). The respondents interviewed spoke often of how they were treated as irrelevant or outdated, while generally, men at their workplaces with some gray in their hair were considered wise and experienced.

In 2020, the American Psychological Association adopted a new resolution on ageism that recognizes age as a discrimination risk factor. The World Health Organization released a report in 2021 that found that one in two people around the globe have discriminatory and bigoted attitudes about older people. Researchers concluded that this ageism can pervade not only laws and policies, but social norms and perceptions that lead to harm and isolation of those tangled in its net.


Milton Mills, MD—a longtime vegan and an urgent care-medicine and critical-care physician—has seen firsthand how intersections of discrimination can be deadly. Mills, who is Black, believes in the power of plant foods for optimal health, but also knows that it is not a panacea to every medical issue one might face. There are extenuating circumstances beyond food that influence health, like how poverty and lack of access can contribute to asthma for those living in polluted environments. Or how fetal and early childhood experiences, such as malnutrition or exposure to toxins, can lead to lifelong physical and chemical changes in the brain.

“Veganism is like air bags, seat belts, and crumple zones in automobiles,” Mills says. “It can't promise that you won't experience a severe accident, but it markedly improves our odds of avoiding one and survival if we do.”

“That said, there are many factors that go into health, and boiling it down to diet alone is not only simplistic, it ignores components like poverty, accessibility, and environment, and the roles they play in vitality,” he continues.

Indeed, just as women tend to bear the brunt of where sexism and other forms of oppression intersect, BIPOC are also discriminated against when aging becomes a factor. It doesn't help when vegans promote unrealistic and exclusionary ideals or promises. “Ageism is deeply woven throughout our entire society, and the vegan aesthetic tends to be slim, healthy, and perpetually young,” Mills says. “Those of us over here on actual planet Earth will age and have disease or illness sometimes. I feel it is very unhealthy to perpetuate stereotypes

“The most successful human societies are the ones that preserve and transmit the wisdom and accumulated cultural and familial memories from their elders—especially their grandmothers.”



and sketchy promises that are rooted in bigoted attitudes. It's not only unethical, but it closes the movement off to large swathes of people who might otherwise be interested."

WHAT GOES AROUND

In addition to harming others, ageism is essentially being biased against our future selves. Aging is something we will all experience if we are fortunate enough. But ageism, like all forms of prejudice and oppression, is a choice we can reject once we become aware of the diminishing attitudes we hold and actively challenge them. While there are valid reasons to fear getting older—such as worries about health or being alone—research shows that after adjusting for significant variables like finances and marital status, people are generally happier as we age.

Studies show that people tend to be happiest at the beginning and end of our lives, a phenomenon called the "U-curve of happiness." It is the awareness that time is limited that helps older people to live in the present and make conscious decisions about how they want to spend that time and with whom they want to spend it. Children live in the moment because they lack experience, and seniors live in the moment because of their life experience and wanting to make the best use of the time they have left.

Aging is not easy or fun in all moments for everyone, but research shows once we get past our 40s—when the happiness U-curve dips the lowest because we are often consumed with career advancement and responsibilities for children or parents (or both)—we generally get happier and happier.

Our society's messages about and portrayals of older people are out of step with this reality, though. Seniors are too often thought of as sad, lonely, pitiable, and feeble with nothing left to contribute—and these biases influence how we treat others and think about ourselves as we get older. Internalized, negative attitudes about aging can also literally decrease our lifespans: a 2022 Harvard study of 14,000 people over the age of 50 found that respondents who had the highest satisfaction with aging had a 43 percent lower risk of dying from any cause over a four-year period compared to those with the lowest satisfaction.

COMPASSION AT EVERY AGE

JUL Fields is on a mission to change attitudes about aging from grim surrender to clear-eyed affirmation. A prolific vegan author, coach, and consultant, Fields is confident she has had professional experiences of being overlooked for advancements due to ageism—she is 58—but she's also unapologetically sanguine about the fact that getting older doesn't have to mean receding into the background. "If you want to do something, do it," she says. "Don't wait for permission or acceptance."

Leading a monthly coaching group over Zoom called Aging Compassionately, Fields works with her members on the value of walking toward this stage of life (during which so many people, especially women, are given the message to "defy" our

age or face erasure) with self-compassion while also normalizing the changes that come with age, which can include more confidence and less worrying about what other people think of ourselves. As a popular public speaker, Fields has personally felt being displaced at large vegan events that emphasize veganism as a fix for everything, from weight gain to aging.

"It seems like so many speakers are 'selling' veganism as a magic pill for being skinny, living forever, or being so-called 'ageless.' In some ways, I feel I've become more comfortable with my age and in my body as a form of defiance. Vegans can, and do, look just like me," Fields says. "You want me to feel bad about how I look or how I age? Nope. I'll embrace it instead."

Indeed, societies that are the most robust and flourishing, Mills notes, are those that strive toward real diversity and respect. "One of the most powerful and important concepts that is underappreciated is the value of diversity, which includes a range of ages," he says. "The most successful human societies are the ones that preserve and transmit the wisdom and accumulated cultural and familial memories from their elders—especially their grandmothers."

Not only do activists benefit from a range of ideas from a diversity of voices, Simon believes it ripples out to benefit those receiving our vegan outreach and messaging. "When I started as a vegan activist in the 1990s, we were focused on education and community gatherings. While these may not have been the most effective strategies for wide-scale change, I am not convinced that the current glamorizing of veganism on social media, clicktivism, and obsession with 'food tech' is any better," she says. "We all need to collaborate, learn from past mistakes, and allow for a diverse set of strategies that will reach diverse audiences."

Nearly 25 years after I started my activism on behalf of the animals, I am now on the side of The Gray Brigade myself, though usually with pink or purple hair these days. Who am I kidding, though? To the young vegan activists I meet, I am definitely more of an oldster. I still have so much more to give, however, and certainly a lot more to learn from people of all ages and backgrounds in our work to help make the world a more compassionate place. I can't help but wonder how much more rich and nuanced my experience as a vegan, an activist and, well, a human being would be if I had seen older people as the complex individuals they are with a myriad of histories, passions, and skills.

We cannot afford the brain drain that occurs when we ignore the individuals who don't fit our definition of which voices deserve to be heard. The animals and the planet need all hands on deck—young ones and those with a few age spots alike. **W**

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