

A Movement of Old Lesbians by Barbara Macdonald

(Following is a cut version of the talk given by Barbara Macdonald at the First West Coast Conference and Celebration By And For Old Lesbians, April 1987.)

Ageism is a form of sexism, and it is worldwide. In every region of the world, old women are the poorest of the poor... As feminists, we see that women do the unpaid work of the world. What we don't see is how often old women are asked to do the unpaid work of younger women. It is the common language of women around the world: "I left the children with my mother."...

But why focus on ageism in the lesbian-feminist community in particular? Because we are the lesbian-feminist community, and we won't recognize ageism until we recognize it in ourselves, just as we could not address sexism in the larger community until we had uncovered the effects of sexism in our own lives. Another reason is that coming from us, it hurts more. Ageism in the straight world is no surprise — there is no shock. Ageism is no contradiction to their fundamental beliefs about women, and it serves their goals well. But ageism in our own feminist community does shock us! It is such a contradiction to feminism; it contradicts our own beliefs about women and it does not serve our vision of a new society.

Ageism is a form of sexism, and we all learned it in a male-defined family, where a woman much older than ourselves was there to serve a man and us, the children. She had no needs of her own, did not even have a space of her own...she slept in the master's bedroom. She was a servant without the privacy of a servant's quarters, and because she had been convinced by the man that she did this unpaid work for love, because it was her nature, many of us — the children — have believed it all our lives. When some of us became the servant, and then became feminists, we said, "pay us," and we said "this is not natural." But the feminist movement did not include old women in their new vision - they made old women invisible...

But we meet an obstacle in organizing to end this invisibility. For, we come from families and carry our dread of old women with us... We have become the old woman we were once told we must "respect," this admonition to prevent our taunting, our jeers, our ignoring — to prevent our showing contempt for old women. As long as we hold on to this legacy of our own ageism, we oppress ourselves from within. But I believe that every one of us can separate ourselves from our internalized ageism. At such times, we know that we are seen as ugly, and we know that we are not ugly, only old. We look at ourselves and watch our bodies change with a sense of wonder and know we are in step with life. We see that young women expect us to give them unconditional love, to step aside for their lives which we are expected to acknowledge are more important than our own, and are angry at this childish expectation...we hear a young woman say that she has respect for old women and we know we will not settle for honor or respect and the contempt these words cover up. We will not settle for less than equality.

We have become the old woman we dreaded to be, and find we like being who we are now. We live it with joy, and have come here to celebrate it... And yet there is a dread that holds us back from taking charge of our lesbian power. What is it, then, that we dread? Is it not some unnamed fear of the future — something that keeps moving ahead of us but is never where we are? ...Are we not dealing with a myth of old age — an accumulated deposit of everyone's fears of the uncertainty of life, which we push ahead each year until it is compressed into the farthest end of our lives...

As all of you are aware, services have been developed by lesbian professionals, primarily younger women, to assume the role of loving protectors of us — or to use their words, 'their elders' — and they are segregating and stereotyping us in ways that are a replica of mainstream services and that are disempowering to us individually and to the movement of old lesbians to eliminate ageism. We need a dialogue with these services. For in the mainstream, such services perpetuate ageism, ghettoize, discourage political organizing, and set up a welfare model approach to women's old age. In the straight world, such a model suits a male agenda. Transporting these services into the lesbian

community, without criticism, without any analysis of ageism, means we are being asked to accept separate-but-equal, and allows professionals to explain us to the world.

I know of no other group in our community that is so blatantly patronized, made the subject of others' revulsion or pity or sentimentality, and also so openly exploited by professionalism. We are being named before we can name ourselves by women who feel they have the right to name us whether or not we choose.

Our own panic about what's ahead is a lynchpin of ageism. In that panic lies the power we give to younger professional lesbians to take control of our lives...

Some of you may be thinking, "Living in a wheelchair, being paralyzed from a stroke, unable to hear or see, or being unable to speak, these are inherent risks of old age." But they are not inherent risks of old age — they are inherent risks of life, which any of us may face at any age, any day of our lives.

As we confront the problem of segregating and patronizing services, surely we have a model of autonomy in the movement of disabled lesbians and disabled straight feminists who are challenging the women's movement. These are women, some of whom struggle for each breath, who are severely disabled by a stroke, who are palsied or move about in wheelchairs. They have not asked of the women's movement that they be allowed to have separate tea-dances for disabled women; they have not asked that some dyke be assigned by an agency to come to their home to talk about lesbianism because they are lonely; they have not asked for separate housing or separate centers for the disabled. They are demanding that their needs be met by the larger women's community in a spirit of equality, and we should learn from them and form coalitions with them as we develop an autonomous movement of old lesbians. What kind of movement will ours be?

As lesbians, we have a lot on our side. Who is in a better position to examine both the oppression of ageism and the reality of women's aging than old dykes? We have not taken the well-marked route from daughter to wife to mother to grandmother, adjusting our behavior to fit a series of male definitions of who we should be at each stage. Somewhere along that track, we each said no.

Oppressions are uncovered by only one group — those who daily feel the oppression, whose lives are chipped away by each encounter until one day, one woman, and then another, decides, "No more. I will not ignore this hatred. I will not try to run away from it. I will search it out willfully, whether it is disguised as deference, honor, respect, or sympathy, or presents itself as naked hatred of my aging body or as a primitive fear of my old and ancient rage."

Having made such a commitment, the task is not going to be an easy one. Unlike other oppressions that have already been named, there is not a body of accumulated work to document our experience — no visibility of a 300-year and continuing struggle to get out from under the yoke of discrimination in America; no written account of 2,000 years of oppression, worldwide, to name what we feel; no first wave; no second wave of anti-ageism to make us part of a sisterhood that will bear testimony to our experience.

Let this be a movement of brave old dykes led by brave old dykes. Age is a time of great wonder — a time when we have to hold, with a fine balance contradictory truths in our heads and give them equal weight; old is scary but very exciting; chaotic but self-integrating; narrowing yet wider; weaker yet stronger than ever before.

It is we who must name the processes of our own aging. But just as we could not begin to say what it means to be a woman until we had confronted the distortions of sexism and homophobia, so we cannot explore our aging without examining and confronting ageism. It is the task that lies before us.