

Why OLOC has an Age Cut-Off of 60? Why We Call Ourselves "OLD"

The Planning group of the First West Coast Conference by and for Old Lesbians, after heated discussion and much consciousness raising, defined "old" for purposes of admission to the Conference as age 60 and over. The group reached a firm agreement that, although welcoming and appreciating the help of younger and mid-life lesbians, this conference was for OLD Lesbians.

This issue came up so repeatedly that we finally were able to see that our own conditioning, our own ageism, if you will, interfered with our clear thinking. The problems of mid-life (women from 40 to 59) are different from the problems of old age, and important and painful as those midlife problems may be, to lump aging from 40 to 90 and over is once again to trivialize the problems of old women- and once again to defer to younger women. We are expected to be available to nurture young and mid-life lesbians. Instead we boldly, "No, this is our space." We took this strong stand to affirm ourselves.

Young women and midlife women, including lesbians, anticipate with dread their own aging, and the projection of their dread and fear on us is disruptive to our process of dealing with our own issues. When the experience of women from 50 on up is lumped together, it only furthers the ageist notion that real life takes place in the thirty years from 20 to 50, that thereafter life is nothing but a void, that old age is a terminal disease.

Although the patriarchy would like old women to believe that, and we are constantly bombarded by media images of old women who retrench, settle and resign, we are saying NO to that lie. There is life that is good after 60 and 70 and 80 and 90, and we can make it much better as we fight the oppression and stereotyping of old women, even when that oppression comes from younger lesbians.

The age limitation was imposed for still another important reason. In both the lesbian and the feminist communities there are those who see themselves as committed to the old, doing good for the old, speaking FOR us. This is pure ageism, pure and simple. It disempowers us and fosters dependency. Here we will speak for ourselves, and with each other as we share our lives.

About our use of the word "old." I have almost never used the term "old woman" or "old lesbian" without getting some response, a wince, a titter, a giggle, heavy silence or an argument. "Why would you want to put it that way? Isn't older a better way to say it?" After all, in our society "old" has come to mean not a biological stage of life but a category of denigration. To be an old woman means to be invisible, expendable, sexless, mindless, and powerless.

So old women, lesbian and straight, get the message from everywhere that the way we are is not good. Just to be old and be yourself is not okay. We are taught that old age is tolerable only to the extent that it mimics youth. The message is reinforced for us over and over again, not only in the outer world, but in our own community as well, when young lesbians tend to look through us, dismiss us, speak for us, look up to us as role models, or use us as mothers and grandmothers - all stances serving to provide distance between us rather than friendship and comradeship.

So, in the effort to make a place for ourselves, some of us do what all oppressed minorities do, try to pass - pass for younger. We lesbians particularly know how alienating passing can be! We know how it makes us feel to have to act in ways that are not who we are, to pretend in order to please others. Now as we grow old we want to please and be ourselves!

We are dropping all euphemisms. We are neither "older" (than whom?), nor "elder," nor senior." We name and proclaim ourselves as "OLD," old simply as chronology, a biological fact, without any negative connotations. We no longer wish to collude in our oppression by accommodating to language that implies in any way that "old" means inferior, ugly, or awful. For to the degree that we deny our own aging we cripple our ability to live. By naming ourselves "old," we give up the attempt to pass. And as we thus break our silence, we empower ourselves and each other.

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From the Welcoming Address by Shevy Healey at the First West Coast Conference and Celebration by and for Old Lesbians, Dominguez Hills, California, April 24-27, 1987

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