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Geriatric Power

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Agnes Pelton, *Awakening (Memory of Father)*, 1943, oil on canvas. Collection of the New Mexico Museum of Art. Photo by Blair Clark.

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After listening to my lamentations, one of my kids thought they would make a useful contribution to the field of intergenerational studies. Miguel is forty-four years old, and the fact that I still call him “kid” is one of the symptoms of what he wants me to write about. In our family, we have actually always addressed our children as people. Of course, we spoke to them like small people at first, because they were, but we have always kept in mind that dialogue is exchange, and that declaration is an abuse of power. Oddly, we only recently realized that naming children is a tool to indicate parental ownership. We called our son Miguel, in Spanish, honoring my South American upbringing. It was an anecdotal event designed to preordain his development in relation to my education. However, a couple of years ago, and without any resentment, he mentioned the burden that our choice inflicted on him. Living in a racist society, this blond and blue-eyed descendant of Celtic, European Jewish, and Slavic ancestors was made responsible for a Spanish name that didn't fit visual stereotyping. This led to long explanations on his part about the reasons behind his name. In fact, he should have had the right to name himself and control his own affiliation. Shaped by the collective belief that parents own their children, we didn't think that the name we gave him might affect his life, and he never challenged our authoritarian move. Luckily, we were spared the usual ambivalence that exists between generations.

Our family, at least for the most part, has functioned on a nonauthoritarian dialogic level. Things are to be reasoned out—that was also the way my spouse and I grew up ourselves. In my case, the absence of arbitrary authoritarianism at home (the only prohibition was riding a motorcycle) led to a hypersensitivity towards any show of power outside of it. As a student, I was part of a generation of know-it-alls. In our view, old people in power suffered from asshole syndrome. They were loathsome, self-interested, and exploitative characters. Our mission was to topple the old ones, take over the world, impose our impeccable beliefs and knowledge, and then everybody would be happy. However, today most people in government are at best inept and at worst genocidal. Though much younger than my generation, they continue abusing power as our ancestors did. They are therefore constantly confronting us with our failure in educating them.

While I shared some of my generation's beliefs—including the belief that we knew better than anyone else before us—I decided that art and education were the tools with which I could help to change the world. Many of my fellow art school students made the same decision, and we set out to change the curriculum in radical ways. We organized sit-ins and got what we wanted. One of my unfortunate tasks was to go on behalf of the student body and talk to the art history professor we were rallying against. I was to tell him that we wanted somebody more attuned to contemporary art, and that studying the work of Praxiteles was not enough to satisfy our educational needs. We also didn't buy his idea that the motivation for making art could be reduced to love and death. The art historian, in truth a poet of some national repute, gave me a disconcerted look and asked, "But what else is there?" At the time I took the remark as a confirmation of our will to have him fired. Today I am ashamed of our schematic callousness. He had raised a subject worthy not so much of changing any minds, but of discussing at length over at least one cup of coffee. Though love and death don't offer a comprehensive explanation for art, they do have some impact on it and deserve some discussion.

In terms of personal development, I was convinced that success in art would eventually give me credibility and help me make people listen to what I had to say. This, of course, was coupled with the belief that what I had to say was worth listening to. To establish an audience wasn't an easy task. Later, while teaching at a US university, I was considered an outlier for being both a foreigner and an artist. This was on top of the fact that in terms of scholarly recognition, art was faced with skepticism, and any suggestions that challenged the parameters of the existing academic "box" were dismissed for lack of seriousness. To achieve academic credibility in art seemed to require many more publications and other demonstrations of success than in other fields. Today, in my eighties, I have finally reached the desired level of credibility. Ironically, this happened after and because of my retirement. During my teaching years I may have taken the classroom too seriously and neglected my art promotion by only exhibiting during academic vacation time.

That struggle is now over, but I have unexpectedly encountered a new obstacle. It is the experience of being on the other side of the generation gap. Today I have become a member of that same generation I despised when I was a student. This was a slow and insidious process that I only perceived gradually and marginally. I started thinking about retirement when a student who was a fan of hip-hop asked me what music I liked. I answered that I favored classical music. After a long silence he looked at me and said, "Oh, you mean The Beatles?" Though the answer made me sad, I could conceive both of a valid future without Bach and the fact that this future was something beyond my scope of judgment. The exchange made me realize that there was a cultural divide that was difficult to erase, but also that this didn't mean we couldn't talk.

Recently, however, this latter assumption was challenged too. I have lived my whole life in a world of dialogue where ideas encountered ideas. When I give a lecture, I always look forward to the Q&A. What I lecture on bores me—I know it already. What I receive in an unexpected question makes me think and learn. I may get upset during discussions, curse other people (internally) and (also internally) wish them dead, but I also remember that dialogue is always about persuading and not winning. I may also despise my interlocutor, but generally I take them at full value. Whatever way I volley the ball, I expect a return shot—and to learn from it.

Lately, the ball often stays on the other side of the net. What I say seems to be taken as a declaration and no longer as a challenge. I perceive in my interlocutors a fear that answering my provocations would show disrespect for my old age, or worse, that I'm using my age to abuse power. Mysteriously, my statements are suddenly misunderstood as

orders or as genuinely intended to be cutting instead of just sounding that way for argumentative effect. I recently pointed out my skepticism to a dancer who wanted to use dance as a starting point for education in primary school. I told her that using a craft as a point of departure carried with it the danger of biasing and reducing the process of knowing. She accused me of being authoritarian and meddling with her approach, and she dropped out of the project. As an educator who doesn't believe in authoritarian exchanges, this makes me think that my days of effective communication have come to an end. It is I who should have dropped out of the project. This is the event that I shared with Miguel and that has now led me to write this text.

Credibility is important to validate a dialogue, though it is not an end in itself—otherwise it runs the risk of building egos and myths instead of facilitating true dialogic communication. Age compounds this problem because it establishes an ambivalence around respect/disrespect that is difficult to navigate. On one hand, the advanced age of an interlocutor can raise often-justified suspicions of anachronism. On the other, it may create respect based on the amount of life lived rather than on its quality. Credibility together with age therefore seems to create an unwelcome force of geriatric power that interferes with the exchange of ideas. Even silence is read as an intimidation tactic and an abuse of power, though the truth is that if I don't say something it only means that I have nothing to say or that I am ignorant on the subject.



Utagawa Kuniyoshi, *Yoko protecting his father from a tiger*, 1840. License: Public Domain.

The Beatles/Bach gap is easy to detect. Though not quantifiable, when that chasm appears it is visible enough to be impossible to miss. Since it is not correctable, one way to deal with it is to make retirement mandatory at a given age, even if age is an imprecise reference. However, it is more difficult to perceive and to regulate the impact of geriatric power reflected in either acceptance or rejection of what is being said. A young person may instinctively cede a seat on a bus as a courtesy and sign of respect, but the gesture may be rejected as patronizing or as an insult. Do I really look that frail? On the other hand, well-meaning advice based on experience gained through a long life may be taken as an invasion of privacy or as presumptuousness. These cultural intricacies are intertwined with mixed individual reactions and can only be handled through personal empathy, which is also difficult to quantify. How can one separate wisdom from pomposity, or perception from self-perception in meaningful statistical ways? In the absence of clear answers or methodologies that help develop authentic self-perception on both sides of the gap, the problem should at least be put clearly on the table to help develop some awareness.

Neither can old people be reduced to a neatly defined status of obsolete and authoritarian assholes, nor can disrespectful and fanatic young people be dismissed as immature and authoritarian assholes. Obsolescence, authoritarianism, and immaturity are real situations that may be confronted and sometimes even corrected. Here, the word "asshole" only represents a qualitative attribution that is meant to evaluate frustration over not seeing any possibility of correction. In that sense the use of the word is very similar to trying to decree a fixed age for retirement. Effectiveness expires as of midnight on your sixty-fifth birthday. It would be better if both assholeness and retirement would instead be heavily based on self-assessment and eased by dialogue. We should be educated to perceive our own degree of assholeness, our ability to communicate without noise and, as a consequence, be able to estimate the

right moment to leave an activity. Ultimately the issue is not age but power—both how power is misused, as well as how it is perceived and the ways in which people believe that it is being misused.

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