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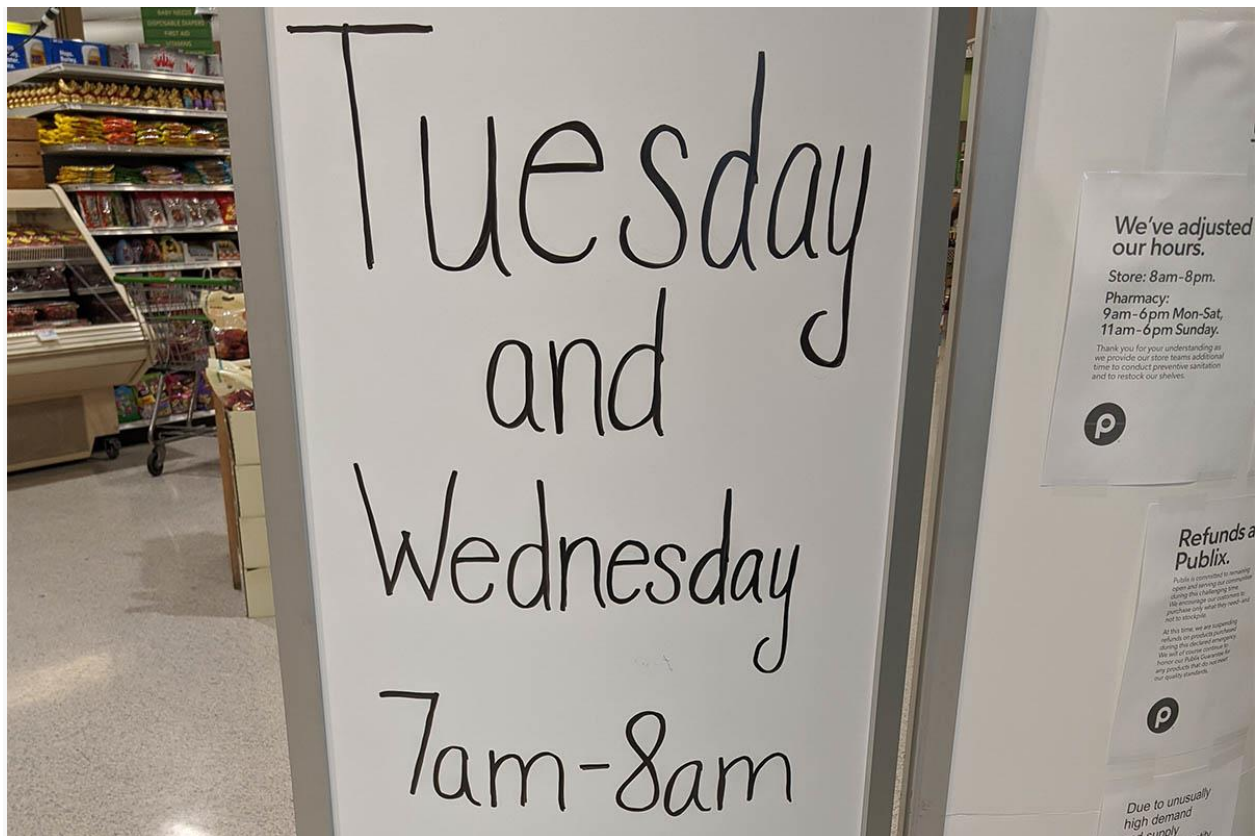
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'Old' in the Age of Coronavirus

By Jeff Kunerth
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, April 22, 2020

The way we redefine what old means is not to run away from it, but to live our lives in rebuttal of the old stereotypes.



It's 6:45 a.m. Tuesday. I'm standing in the predawn darkness outside Publix in a line of people dressed in casual infectious-disease attire: shorts, sandals, masks and plastic gloves.

A woman approaches and asks, “Is this the line for old people?”

Yes it is. Yes we are.

We are old whether we admit it or not. We are old whether we feel like it or not.

I’m 68. By the definition of the coronavirus, that makes me one of the susceptible, one of the vulnerable. A few years older, I wouldn’t be allowed outdoors.

So much for 70 being the new 50.

It’s not. Seventy is still 70. And 68 is not 48.

I’ll concede that 68 doesn’t feel like 68, but that’s because I’ve never been 68 before.

I’ll concede that 68 doesn’t feel like 68, but that’s because I’ve never been 68 before. None of us knew what it would be like when we reached old age, except for our preconceptions of what old means: frail and senile.

So when we reach that age and find that it’s different from what we expected, we like to feel we are reinventing aging. It’s a Boomer thing: We are always discovering something that already existed and proclaim it uniquely ours.

The fact is that active, healthy, mentally sharp old people existed long before we arrived. We just didn’t see the men and women in their 70s, 80s, and even into their 90s who were physically fit and mentally sharp.

I came to understand this when, at 48, I wrote a project for the Orlando Sentinel called Old People. In researching the myths and reality of aging, I met a 102-year-old woman who still managed her own finances; an 85-year-old man who went back to school to get his high school diploma at 81; an 88-year-old woman who bought her first bike at 73 as a form of physical therapy; an 80-year-old woman who switched to painting watercolors after osteoarthritis made it impossible for her to play the violin.

We know now that frailty and senility aren’t natural consequences of aging. They’re the product of disease: osteoporosis, arthritis, dementia, hypertension, lung and heart disease, cancer, diabetes. And accidents.

Those who dodge these bullets achieve what the experts call “optimal aging.”

It’s 7:45 a.m. Wednesday. I’m in line outside Target. There’s one woman with a cane, but nobody else looks feeble, decrepit or senile.

A young man in a red polo with the name tag “Ryan” approaches.

“This line here is for our vulnerable guests 65 and over,” he says. “We are asking everyone to remain six feet apart according to CDC guidelines.”

We all move six feet apart.

After he leaves, a young couple walks toward us.

“This line is for 65 and older,” says the woman in front of me. She repeats herself in case they didn’t hear it correctly the first time.

The younger couple retreats to the other line for those not old and vulnerable.

This is the privilege of longevity: senior discounts, early-bird specials and first dibs on toilet paper.

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I have my health issues, but I do not feel vulnerable. I like to feel I’m on the trajectory to optimal aging. You remain healthy, fit and sharp right up until the end. Instead of a long, slow decline, you fall off the cliff.

I knew someone like this. Carl died at the age of 101 in his sleep. But while still in his 90s, he was rowing a boat shirtless to show off his muscles, doing his daily exercises, and engaging me in intelligent conversations.

We know that a regular regime of diet and exercise can decrease our chances of ending up feeble and demented. But we fool ourselves if we believe that optimal aging is the same as anti-aging. There is no such thing: We age, we die. No amount of probiotics, crossword puzzles and Pilates leads to immortality.

I’ve seen the opposite of optimal aging in a generation that cooked with lard and never stepped inside a Planet Fitness. They live in my mother’s nursing home: people in wheelchairs who can’t bathe, dress or feed themselves, some of them out of their minds.

This is still what we think of as old because old is still a pejorative term. Old is worn out, obsolete, antiquated, useless, irrelevant.

The only positive use of the term I’ve found is Old School, which carries with it a measure of respect.

We’ve never really found a positive synonym for old. Seniors? Like we’re still in high school. Golden Oldies? Sounds like a sitcom.

The way we redefine what old means is not to run away from it, or deny it, or hide from it, but to live our lives in rebuttal of the old stereotypes.

I had a student in my office who saw the photo on my desk of my wife and myself on our adventure vacation to Alaska a few years ago. She looked at the postcards from our trips to Italy and England the last two years.

With great hesitation, she asked how old I am.

“I’m 68.”

She was shocked. My life—including writing, teaching, travel, biking, hiking, kayaking, running and remembering some of my passwords—defied her image of what it means to be 68.

I’m old. I admit it. I accept it. I embrace it.

In the age of coronavirus, when old means vulnerable, we can’t redefine what we refuse to acknowledge.