



FROM THE CEO, DREW DYSON

The Impact of Ageism

Dear Friends,

Prince Taylor was an extraordinary human being. The former Princeton resident (Laurel Circle) and bishop in the United Methodist Church was ninety-four years old when he passed in 2001. In our last conversation, a year before his death, Bishop Taylor challenged me to maintain a positive outlook on life, even when it becomes most difficult. “Each day,” he shared, “I wake up happy to have another day to learn and grow and to make a difference in someone’s life.” He went on to share that his retired years had been among his best, stating that he approached aging “with excitement for what’s next!” Turns out, his positive outlook on aging was likely a contributing factor to his long, active life.

Yale psychologist and epidemiologist Dr. Becca Levy, professor in the Yale School of Public Health, has spent her career to this point studying ageism and its effects on the health and well-being of older adults. In her new book, *Breaking the Age Code*, Dr. Levy demonstrates that ageism is about more than “hurt feelings or discriminatory behavior,” but also deleteriously affects physical and cognitive health in dramatic ways, including a dramatic shortening of one’s life expectancy. This book follows on her 2002 longitudinal study of older adults over a twenty year span in rural Ohio showing that one’s own positive views of aging early in retirement extended life by a median of seven and a half years.

Dr. Levy and her colleagues measure ageism by testing subliminal biases evidenced in word association with images to test for negative or positive associations. Through her work over more than thirty years, we know that ageism not only impacts longevity, but ageist

attitudes can also lead to significant cardiovascular events, physical functioning, and even Alzheimer’s disease, with significant decreases in the size of the hippocampus, the region of the brain connected with memory. Significantly, her research on the APOE4 gene, connected with increased risk for Alzheimer’s, shows that “those without the gene who had positive age beliefs had as low a risk as people without the gene.”

Ageism also has a dramatic impact on public policy and medical spending. Three significant factors of ageism, specifically age discrimination, negative age stereotypes, and negative self-perceptions of aging “lead to \$63 billion in excess annual spending on common health conditions like cardiovascular and respiratory disease, diabetes, and injuries.” These national findings are supported by the World Health Organizations 2021 Global Report on Ageism, which also found that one in every two people globally held ageist attitudes toward older adults. That report finds that “ageism arises when age is used to categorize and divide people in ways that lead to harm, disadvantage, and injustice” and shows up in prejudicial attitudes, discriminatory acts, and



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institutional policies and practices that perpetuate stereotypical beliefs.

Dr. Levy finds hope, however, in her belief that “damaging ideas about age can change.” She argues that while it is extremely difficult to create beliefs, you can activate them by reinforcing positive associations with aging like “active,” “full of life,” instead of “grumpy” or “helpless.” She also encourages intergenerational activities in common life (such as our GrandPals PenPals or Seniors-for-Seniors programs) as well as learning about ageism and discovering simple, yet powerful tools to combat ageism.

The Silver Century Foundation is a local organization committed to “promoting a positive view of aging...and shining a light on entrenched societal ageism.” The Silver Century Foundation is the powerful work of local resident Katherine

Klotzburger and has been working on this mission since its founding in 2002. Their website, www.silvercentury.org, offers a clearinghouse for resources focused on combatting ageism and challenging stereotypes. It is a go-to resource and one I encourage you to discover.

Dr. Levy believes in an “age liberation movement,” that sweeps the country and counters the disturbing narrative that aging is something to be feared rather than something to embrace with hope and possibility. Bishop Taylor encouraged aging adults to have an optimistic outlook as they write the next, and perhaps greatest, chapter of their lives. What about you?

All the Best,
Drew A. Dyson, PhD
Chief Executive Officer