

Learning to Nurture a Positive Attitude

Two separate visits to two new residents at our assisted living facility at the United Methodist Homes on the same morning! They both arrived on the same day and now live a few doors from each other, never having met before. The contrast could not have been more extreme. Two distinctly different responses. Two radically different approaches to change.

One hopeful and expectant. One despairing and resigned to things never being any better.

Both are suggestive of attitudes we bring to aging, whether our own or that of someone we care for and about.

Asked how things were going in their first week in a new setting, he said, “Couldn’t be any better! I’m as free as a bird. I have my apartment and laundry cleaned for me, my meals are served and they’re delicious. I can pick and choose from a variety of things to do. I go to my office at least once a week and do what I like the best—pursue my life-long career.” He is a mere 93 years old.

She said, “I’m in prison! But what did I expect? Everyone gets old and this is what happens. I’ll get used to it, but I’ll never like it!” She is barely seventy years old.

Both attitudes—both approaches to aging—are real in the older adult population. Both are real among those who do ministry with older adults. The first, obviously, is the more constructive and life giving. The second is self-destructive and saps the energy out of the person and those around him or her.

The question these attitudes raise for those who care for and about older adults is, “Can I do something to foster the first and diminish the second?” Ultimately there is the frustrating reality that no one can change anyone else’s attitude. Every individual is finally in charge of his or her attitude and approach to life. However there are some things that can help foster the possibility of a healthier attitude. Let me suggest a few:

- Listen, without judgment to the negative comments. Explore the reasons for the negativity. Often there are legitimate reasons for them. Talking about them and dealing with them often is therapeutic and helpful.
- After listening, gently observe some positive things, some concrete actions that might be taken by saying something like, “You used to love to knit, would you please make Mary a scarf? She would love one from you.” Or “Josie cannot see to read her own mail, you’re a great reader, would you read to her?”
- Gently remind the person of the strength and resilience he/she has already demonstrated, having made it into being an older adult. That strength can still be tapped. Talk about spiritual resources that she might use.
- Expect a different attitude and share with her how much confidence you have that she will choose a different approach.