

Rowena was by far one of my more memorable parishioners. She was always dressed in the latest style, always had her hair perfectly coiffed, was always open to new ideas, always able to deal with anything that life brought with it! I valued her input on various committees because she would always “cut to the chase,” and insist that we deal with whatever issue was before us. She was never unkind, but spoke what she saw to be the truth, even if her friends disagreed with her. I loved conversing with her because her mind was so alive and active. Therefore I was surprised one day when this ninety plus year old woman showed me her driver’s license, which had just been renewed. Where the awful photo that is usually there was supposed to be there was a beautiful photo of her when she was much younger. She had cut it out to fit over the Motor Vehicle picture, which she said made her “look like an old lady.” “I don’t see myself as an old lady and I don’t expect anyone else to see me that way either.” You had to love Rowena!

Perception is everything - or so it is said. Facts, for some of us, do not seem to get in the way of our preferred visions.

I thought of this recently when talking with one of the newer residents at Wesley Village. I had never met her before, but since this is a retirement village, I assumed that she was an older adult (which, by the way, she is). One of the first things she said in our first meeting was, “I am not now, and never will be, an older adult.” She was vehement! I had never said anything about her age, but she clearly wanted me to know how she felt. In subsequent conversations the source of such feeling became clear. She had a preconceived notion of what our culture means when it uses such words (older adult, senior citizen, mature adult) and she did not and would not share the vision. More importantly, her family members had bought into the vision and were often trying to limit her in ways that she found inappropriate and based on a false vision of what getting older means. She and her family are not alone!

It is important that those of us who minister to and with older adults remember to check our assumptions!

The fact is that all people do not age the same way.

The fact is that – as with people of every age – variations are the rule, not the exception.

The fact is that we – by virtue of living in a time and culture that idolizes youthfulness and seeks to prolong it as long as possible – have learned to see aging through a seriously warped vision.

The fact is that we need to examine our perceptions and allow each individual to be the unique event she is, the one of kind creation he is, rather than seeing older adults as a monolithic package. Our ministry will become more creative, more individually focused, and more relevant as a result. We do ourselves and those we seek to minister to and with older adults a disservice if we do not.

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