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Dying for the Common Good

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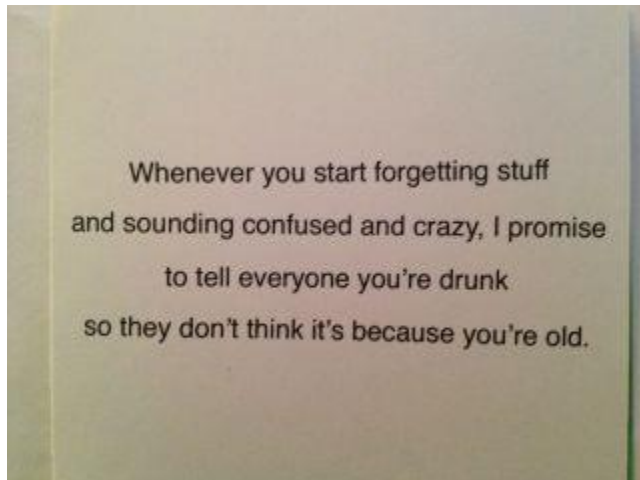
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Dying for the Common Good

Fighting ageism in the 21st century.

Posted Feb 11, 2013

The top rated advertisement of the 2013 Super Bowl was a Taco Bell commercial in which a group of elders escape from a residential facility to have a night on the town. They jump into a swimming pool, dance in a club, and get a tattoo. They end their “riotous” evening at Taco Bell. In the commendable Taco Bell ad everyone deserves a “night on the town” no matter their age. All too often elders are denied these pleasures.



message on a birthday card

One quarter of Japan's 128 million people are over 60. For decades Japan has been held up as the model society for ideal aging, Japan is seen as a place where people live long lives, a society in which loving families,--not to forgot well-funded government programs--graciously take care of their "honorable elders" Despite these seemingly well deserved accolades, Japanese Finance Minister Taro Aso last month stated: Let the elderly hurry up and die. He said that if he were receiving government paid care, would feel bad about the government expenditure and refuse any subsidy. Tar Aso, of course, can easily refuse government health care subsidies because since he is quite wealthy. Most elders do not have Tar Aso's resources.

Global aging is a reality. People are living longer. The population of older men and women is expanding. At the same time, ageist belief and practices are also increasing. Older workers increasingly find themselves battling negative and ageist stereotypes. In a recent survey of people over sixty, nearly 80 percent reported experiencing ageism. Many workers feel that their age prevents them from being taken seriously.

Despite the 40 year-old Age [Discrimination](#) in Employment Act [ADEA] that prohibits employers from making employment decisions based on age, discrimination remains a pervasive force in the workplace. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has reported a more than 24 percent increase in the number of age-discrimination complaints filed this year compared with the previous two years. All too often older employees, even those in their fifties, are considered "old" and report not being offered the same opportunities and support as younger colleagues. Although most blatant forms of ageism like mandatory [retirement](#) and maximum hiring ages are distant

memories, more subtle forms of discrimination still exist. The increased incidence of these subtle forms of age discrimination suggest that while employers may overtly attempt to comply with the law, stereotypes about aging continue to taint their practices.

Gerontologist Robert Butler first defined the term “ageism” in the 1960’s as a form of prejudice that results from a widespread and deep-seated [fear](#) of the aging process. For Butler ageism encompasses prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory practices toward older adults. These attitudes and practices lead to (1) fear of your own aging and (2) a general distancing from older people. Ageism is not based on biological factors alone; it is created and maintained by institutional, social, and cultural values that lead people to denigrate age. Attitudes about age are bolstered through metaphors of disability, decline, and death. Ageist media portrayals are so prevalent that they are often not even recognized. The common denigration of age prompts older adults to denigrate themselves.

Ageism is ever-present in many Hollywood films. In Judd Apatow’s recently made film, *This Is 40*, young people confront their fear of aging. All too often, older people are depicted as insensitive and selfish who, through their desperate actions, attempt to deny aging. With such mainstream imagery it is no wonder that age discrimination is on the rise. Even in an age-sensitive society like Japan, the Finance Minister wants the elderly to hurry and die—for the common good. Perhaps it is time to wake up to the ubiquity of ageism.