

Look beyond stereotypes about aging – Joni shows why

BY MARY O'DONNELL CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Whether or not we're older adults, we all are being bombarded with a blunt political narrative about aging that is as wrong as it is dangerous.

In essence, the message is that “old” equals “bad” and that if a person is going to be a leader, they had better do it while they are young.

Headlines, campaign messages and political cartoons, often across party affiliations, draw upon ageist tropes, painting older people as inherently deficient.

But then, at the Grammy Awards, the world was reintroduced to singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell, and suddenly, a ray of hope broke through the clouds of negative messages and ageist sentiment that have been swirling through the news and contaminating social media feeds.

At my desk the next day, I watched a clip from the show of Mitchell performing her iconic song “Both Sides Now.” I was misty-eyed and deeply moved as the younger singer-songwriter Brandi Carlile introduced the “matriarch of imagination,” and she and musicians of all ages sat with Mitchell to deliver a powerful, intergenerational message of respect for a person who happens to be older than most but in so many ways stronger than ever.

A simple spotlight shined on Mitchell, seated in the center for a transcendent rendition of a beloved anthem. It resonated profoundly with the star-studded audience, viewers at home and this executive in her office.

Why did that one song and the way it was delivered resonate so deeply with so many? I think there are two main reasons, both worth keeping in mind, especially during a moment in history when there is a very real possibility that ageism can damage our democracy.

First of all, her performance defied stereotypes.

Too often, we assume that once people reach a certain age, they have nothing new to offer.

Then came Mitchell, a revelation at age 80, with her debut performance at a Grammy Awards show.

In our youth-obsessed culture, we assume that beauty and creativity are limited to younger generations.

But here was an older woman with beautiful white hair, a shining smile and a stirring voice touching our souls.

There is fear that physical changes and challenges of aging will drain life of meaning. But there was Mitchell, proving how she has learned to walk, talk and sing again after suffering a nearfatal brain aneurysm in 2015. Rather than recovering alone, she tapped into her network of friends of all ages for support and connection.

Her “Joni Jams” became the model for her Grammy performance and an example for us all: Move beyond the stereotypes of aging, and a more nuanced narrative emerges, one that embraces the value and importance of looking at aging from “both sides now.”

Nuance is the second lesson that Mitchell brought to us that night.

It is true that aging does eventually involve some degree of loss – in the form of challenges that are real and should not be disregarded. As Mitchell poignantly sings, “Something’s lost, but something’s gained.”

Aging can also bring increased wisdom, deepened perspectives, greater resilience and often more time to contribute to families, friends and communities.

As Washington University gerontologist Nancy Morrow-Howell said recently, “Older adults need caregivers and older adults are caregivers; older adults need homedelivered meals and older adults deliver meals.

Some older adults can work longer and some can’t.” This view of twosided complexity is so true.

Indeed, some older people are tutors in afterschool programs, and others are community college students themselves.

Some are bold innovators leading companies, and some are consumers of technologies that help older people overcome aging-related challenges.

Some are both. It is important to acknowledge the real limitations that some of us experience as we age – but also the array of opportunities and contributions that accompany later life.

I am grateful to researchers such as Morrow-Howell, advocates such as Ashton Applewhite, author of “This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism,” and champions of collaborative efforts such as the Reframing Aging Initiative.

They remind us of these subtleties and call upon us to advance a more accurate narrative.

How sad it is to see aging reduced to cheap political talking points.

How refreshing to see aging in all its nuanced reality brought to us through the power of song by a beautiful and talented older woman reminding us to look at both sides now.

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