

## Aging gracefully

BY B. NILES

I questioned the usefulness of an assignment I was recently given in my "Women and Aging" class. The paper was to be on ageism. Why should I write a self-reflective dia-



logue on my own awareness of ageism? Hadn't I always been aware of the change of status for older people?

Studying aging was something which I started during my undergraduate degree. The very idea that I would suffer from ageism astonished me.

I had the opportunity to know older people intimately in the small community where I grew up; in country pensioners who had always lived in their own homes, surrounded by their family and friends. I counted myself among the lucky few of my generation who felt comfortable with older people and with their words and ideas.

I would consider their faces and try to imagine what they looked like when they were my age. I knew be-

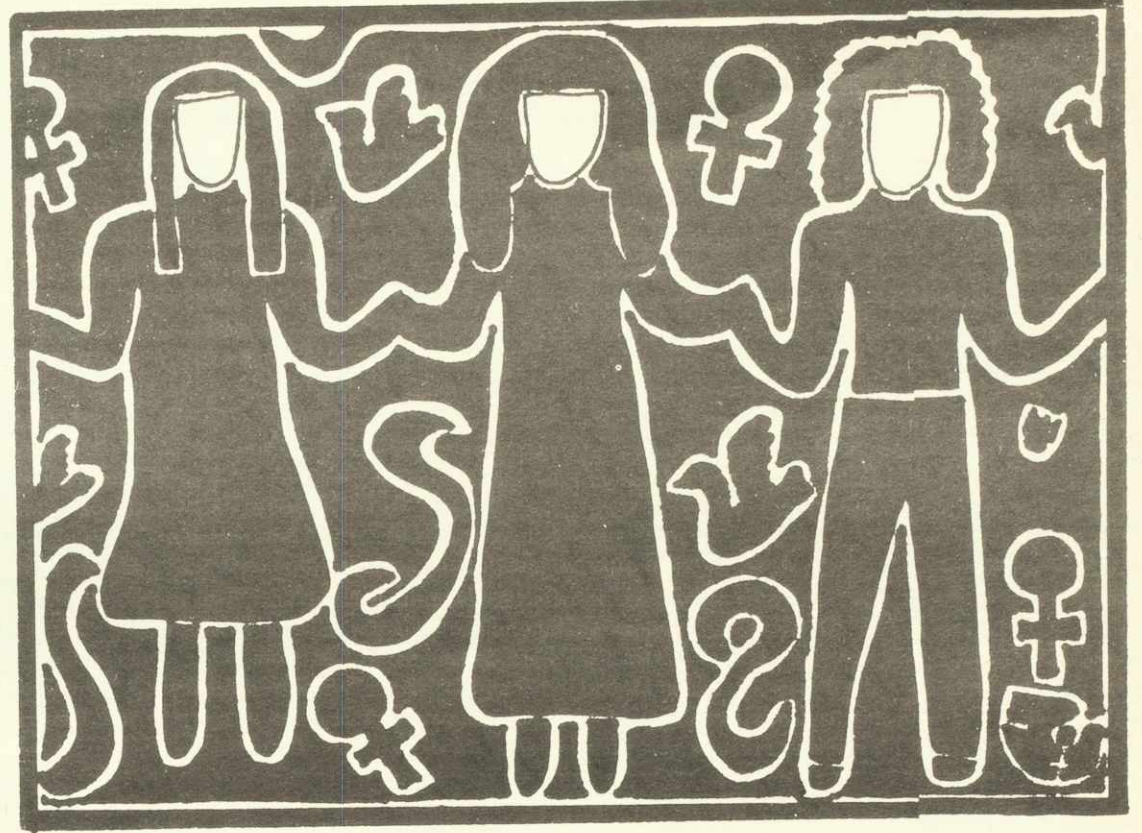
hind the glasses, the wrinkled skin and the slow steps were people with a life history. Did they ever imagine that this is what 'it' would be like?

I treated older people with respect and tried not to attribute behaviours to age. I preferred to think of 'old Sunday drivers' as merely cautious. I knew about pensions, Alzheimer's and the contradictions of retirement. I saw older people on the golf course in sets of four: two sets of coupled friends where the men had retired after successful careers. Their days were being played out in the sun, enjoying fine food and reminiscing fondly about days gone by and their recent Florida vacation.

Then I began to notice that there was something wrong with this picture and it made me feel uncomfortable. I began to see the other side of the coin — old people who had nothing. As I started to look at the characteristics of these impoverished, unhappy people, the faces of women stared back at me in overwhelming numbers and 'aging' took on a different perspective, one where gender, race and class made a big difference.

I had been unaware of these problems because I was white and a graduate student. My education would carry me through. Armed with this attitude, I thought I would be able to prepare myself better for the consequences of aging. Could I have been fooling myself? Was I that unaware?

I learned the economics of being widowed and unpensioned having



spent a life looking after children and a husband. I became aware of the economics of being a black woman who, because of racism, had limited access to opportunity and worked at a low-skill, low-paying jobs all her life. How would she fare in her old age? Aging became another aspect of life where women are left wanting.

I remembered a conversation I had with a friend in which I tried to persuade him that his experience of getting old would be preferable to mine. His prestige would be enhanced by the grey hair appearing at his temples, whereas mine would need to be "dealt with." I tried to tell him,

for women, beauty and age have an inverse relationship and the loss of reproductive ability is equated to the loss of social worth.

I was forced to confront the question of economics of a personal level — how could I adequately plan for my retirement when women make 60 cents for every dollar men earn?

All these things made me angry. I don't like being limited or put-down because of my gender and I am certainly not going to relish being devalued or discriminated against because of my age. Add racism to the list of things to be overcome, and the task seems impossible.

There are real differences between

being young and being old — physical, emotional, and spiritual; some for the worse, some for the better. Ageism, like all -isms, affects self-esteem and equality. Ageism does not permit recognition of attributes and differences in personality, rather it labels old people as a 'homogeneous aggregate' without abilities or talents, a dead weight on society's shoulders.

We fear aging. Do we try to deal with this fear by denying the value of those who personify it? Ageism has many facets. It is an attitude that can be expressed through inaction or ignorance. I must plead guilty to the latter.

## Stepping forward, speaking out, striking back

NAME WITHHELD BY REQUEST

...women live in a different world... they live with a residual fear of physical attack, particularly sexual attack... Federal Justice Minister Kim Campbell

Recent reports of violence against

women have raised my deepest fears and anger about the world in which we live. The death of Jane Hershman Corkum plays on my mind and makes me feel even more personally at risk. It is increasingly difficult to "tune out" or just forget, even for a moment.

I wasn't always so enraged, but in a sense I am happy with my increased awareness. Now I take steps to protect myself, steps I wasn't aware were necessary when I arrived at Dalhousie.

I laughed when the orientation leaders told us not to walk home alone at night, after all I'd grown up

in a big city. If I could walk around downtown alone I could handle Dalhousie campus. Of course I also graduated from high school thinking that women and men were treated equally because the Canadian Constitution said they should be. Oh so naive.

In my time at Dalhousie much has happened to open my eyes to the oppression of women. Experiences of harassment and physical & mental abuse have given me a personal taste of what I've learned about in classes, from friends and through reading. Women friends have helped me find my voice and taught me the skills to take action around my concerns, both personally and politically. I can only hope to pass on as much to other women as they have given to me.

It is so easy to believe you are invincible one, denying your friend was raped so you can deny it may happen to you. I am lucky the Dalhousie-DSU sponsored self-defence workshops and walk home service came about when I was finally ready to face my fear, to take protective steps. A WenDo course and many walks with Tiger Patrol have taught me there are ways to allay my physical fear.

It took me a few weeks to call

Tiger Patrol. At first I would only call when I knew a friend was working. Having overcome the initial embarrassment there are still times I hesitate to call, but during my last few walks with them I have realized how much safer I feel accompanied by these people clothed in bright orange and yellow.

**"Women friends have helped me find my voice..."**

Statistics tell me that there is a greater chance I'll be attacked by a friend or acquaintance, another part of my world in which I must be on guard. This is where I have already suffered the most personal harm. That's harder to fight, no orange and yellow friends keeping watch, just instincts to develop. I have few trusted male friends, and care little about developing more. I cherish these men and the support they offer me. I feel safe with them.

Somehow within the fear and anger which prompts so much of my action I also find hope. I look forward to the day when we can tell our daughters how far we've come.



Breaking bounds with WENDO, the self-defence course for women.

DAL PHOTO: MARIA PATRIQUIN