



***Aging is a Blessing, No Less than Youth Itself:
A Debate at The World Bank***

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ABSTRACT

In March of 2023, The World Bank held an Oxford style debate on paradigms of aging. The event was held during the annual conference for Human Development at the Omni Shoreham Hotel in Washington, DC. Dr. Mukesh Chawla, Advisor for Health, Nutrition and Population at the World Bank Group and Coordinator of the Pandemic Emergency Financing Facility, conceived and chaired the debate. Below are written comments prepared by three of the invited debaters in favor of the resolution: *This House Believes Aging is a Blessing, No Less Than Youth Itself*, a variation from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "*Morituri Salutamas*" poem. The "Wizeaykrs" team, consisted of Drs. Pooja Yerramilli, Ernest Gonzales, and George Alleyne, and argued aging is a blessing and framed each life stage as an opportunity for advancing a healthy and equitable society for individuals, families, communities, and society. The opposing team, the "Yonkers," consisted of Drs. Michal Rutkowski, Adanna Chukwuma, and David Wilson, argued youth was far more of a blessing than later life. Each speaker had five (5) minutes, prior to questions and comments, and an audience vote. Although the vote was 50/50, the Yonkers were deemed winners, which was ascertained with a telephone app that measured the volume of cheers by the audience. Below, please find remarks written by the Wizeaykrs Team, as well as their biographies.

Keywords: ageism, anti-ageism, intergenerational relations, productive aging, social policy

**WRITTEN COMMENTS PREPARED
BY DR. POOJA YERRAMILI**

As a child, I had the privilege of growing up with my great-grandmother. She became the first female school principal in her home town in India – at a time when women were rarely allowed to work. Throughout her life, she pushed for social justice, partaking in the Indian independence movement, encouraging religious reforms in a culture marked by the caste system, and, advocating for the rights of the elderly, extolling their immense contributions to society. I will never forget the early lessons that I learned from my great-grandmother, lessons I could not have learned from school, my teachers, or anyone else. Lessons that have shaped who I am today.

I'm sure many of you have similar stories of the impacts your grandparents have had on your lives, or your parents' impact on your children's lives. I ask you to remember these bonds – not to manipulate your emotions, but to put forth that they have real and quantifiable value. Over the next half an hour, my team will prove to you that “Aging is a Blessing No Less than Youth Itself,” in real and quantifiable terms.

But before we start, we need to understand what this resolution means and doesn't mean.

First, there is no uniform set of characteristics that constitute an “aging” person. I'm a physician, and in my all my years of training and practice, I have treated 80-year-olds who could literally run laps around many of us– we have one running this country right now - to 60-year-olds who are bed-bound. Any attempt to paint a monochromatic picture of all ageing individuals as dependent, or frail, or invalids is ageist and ableist.

Second, youth is commonly defined as the transition period between childhood dependence and adult independence, sometime in your late teens and early twenties. Caveat - here at the World Bank, you call me – a physician over the age of 30 - a “young professional,” which either says something about how you judge *my* maturity or something about the average age at this institution.

Finally, the phrase “no less than” indicates that ageing is a blessing to **the same or even greater extent** than youth itself is. Our team will prove this to you by first defining and deconstructing the “blessings of youth;” delineating the “blessings of ageing” in real, tangible terms; and finally, comparing how the two add up.

So, let's start with youth – I know it may be a long, *long, long* time ago for the average person at the World Bank, but who here doesn't look back at their youth with immense fondness? It's a time in our lives when we feel on top of the world, like anything is possible. But where does this sense of limitless potential come from?

For one, there are a few physiologic blessings - in our “youth” our brains are still developing. We have heightened sensitivity to rewards or the next dopamine hit – which is why we constantly “chase fun.” We also have the immense ability to learn, adapt, and grow, which reinforces the idea of boundless potential. And, of course, relative to later in life, in our youth, many of us are in good health.

But there are also some social blessings. Youth surrounded by families and communities – our “tribe” – don’t have to figure everything out from scratch – we benefit from the wisdom and guidance of our elders, like my great grandmother. But that doesn’t always mean we listen to their guidance -- with these blessings, we feel comfortable adventuring and experimenting – testing the limits of our invincibility and immortality – because this same “tribe” is a safety net we can fall back on when we inevitably make mistakes or have set backs.

This begs the question -- why do our families and communities continue to put up with the sometimes-exasperating antics of youth? Because youth serves a blessing to family too – the joy of seeing in young people the continuation of the tribe – it’s about future legacy.

And what’s in it for society? Youth marks the beginning of when the human capital accumulated in childhood can begin to be utilized, with the expectation that it can continue to build and be utilized throughout your working lifespan, as your future potential manifests.

What it boils down to is this: the blessings of youth are based on youth as an *ideal*, a *value* proposition. They derive predominantly from our perhaps overly optimistic expectations of the future – of invincibility, future legacy, human capital - with no guarantee that these expectations will come to fruition in the absence of a safe and enabling environment – a truth that more youth today are recognizing.

On the other hand, the blessings of ageing to self, family, and society are based on your *lived* past and present, clear track records of contributions that *continue* to compound with the immense wisdom or human capital you have accumulated over your entire lives.

My teammates will count these blessings, and you will see that they are **no less than** the blessings of youth itself.

**WRITTEN COMMENTS PREPARED
BY DR. ERNEST GONZALES**

Good afternoon. In preparation for the debate, I had written quite a moving summary of my early childhood and how my grandparents played an instrumental role in my life.¹ George gave it a read and said: *cut it. Pooja is already talking about her grandparents. Get to the facts.* When Sir George asks you to do something, you do it.

So, let me get to the facts:

Older adults play a critical role in society. Grandparents (and other relatives) raising children save US taxpayers \$4 billion dollars each year by keeping them out of the foster care system ([Generations United, 2017](#), [Pew, 2016](#)). Older adults are extensively involved with informal caregiving, which is valued at approximately \$100 billion annually ([Johnson & Schaner, 2005](#)).

But they are more than just caregivers. They are consumers, workers and volunteers, knitting the social fabric of society one child, one job, one civic duty, at a time.

Although people aged 50 and older account for a quarter (24%) of the world population in 2020, they contribute a third (34%) of global GDP ([AARP, 2022](#)). This translates to \$45 trillion US dollars. And the trend is expected to continue with roughly 40% (39%) of global GDP by 2050 (\$118 Trillion).

In the US, older workers contribute approximately 40% of the national economic output, despite making up just 35% of the population ([Joint Economic Committee Democrats, 2022](#)).

Older adults are also engaged in schools, places of worship, libraries, hospitals, and non-profit organizations as volunteers. Altogether, this is valued at approximately \$77 Billion US dollars, annually ([Gonzales, et al., 2015](#); [AmeriCorps, 2016](#)).

The benefits are not just in dollars.

Under optimal conditions ([Gonzales, 2022](#); [2015](#); *see also additional readings*):

- Informal caregiving is associated with living longer and in good physical and mental health ([Fredman, 2016](#), [Fredman, et al., 2009](#); [Fredman et al., 2008](#)).
- Employment and civic engagement are associated with:
 - fewer depressive symptoms ([Carolan et al., 2020](#); [Morrow-Howell, 2010](#))
 - lower risk of mortality (Glass et al. 1999; Musick, Herzog, & House, 1999)
 - improved cognitive functioning ([Gonzales, et al., 2022](#); [Lee, et al., 2022](#); [Hinterlong & Williamson, 2007](#))
 - Increased economic security ([National Academies of Sciences, 2022](#)), and

- enables individuals to develop and reinforce new knowledge, new skills and renewed purpose in life (Gonzales, et al., 2015, 2022; Hinterlong and Williamson, 2007).
- Other studies have demonstrated a reduction in social isolation among more vulnerable community members, which may prevent or delay the need for individuals to receive formal, paid services (Barker, 2002; Hinterlong, 2002).

Productive aging, under optimal conditions, can delay the onset and severity of disease.

The opposing team is suggesting **youth is more** of an opportunity than aging. And in so doing, they *tip the scales that not every life stage is of equal value*.

We can't afford an unbalanced, biased, deficit approach to life and longevity.

Ageism is expensive. It costs the US \$850 billion in GDP each year due to the untapped resources of producing goods and services by older workers ([Terrell, 2020](#)). By 2050, age discrimination could climb to \$3.9 trillion US dollars. Ageism is also linked to US\$63 billion in health care costs ([WHO, 2021](#)).

Nonetheless, when viewed from a moral perspective, permitting us to slice and dice individuals into age bucks, and attribute positive and negative attributes, permits us to do that on other dimensions, such as race, gender, religion. Stereotyping and “othering” are key mechanisms to inequity.

Pooja so carefully, and benevolently, articulated the challenges facing youth. We must instill a future orientation filled with promise, not just for them, but for everyone. Older adults can be their mentors, friends, allies. Creative social policies can bring generations together to solve some of the most perplexing problems facing us today.

A quick example. [Experience Corps by AARP](#) is a national tutoring and mentoring program. Older adults, many of whom are racial and ethnic minorities, undergo training to tutor 2nd and 3rd graders on reading and math. These children are at risk of not gaining these essential academic skills, often living in under-resourced neighborhoods, and subsequently less likely to graduate from high school and attend college.

[Rigorous evaluations](#) revealed children's academic performance improved. And older tutors demonstrated cognitive plasticity, reduction in falls, reduction in social isolation, depression, an increase in purpose. Stipends yielded greater health benefits among low-income older volunteers. Further, tutors tutored their grandchildren and grandchildren's friends in the neighborhood. Win-win-win outcomes.

Longfellow's perspective on aging leaves little room for debate my friends. Aging is a mighty force, as natural as day and night. *Aging is an opportunity, a blessing, no less than youth itself.*

Closing comments

Thank you, Mukesh and colleagues, for the opportunity to discuss critical perspectives and challenges to longevity and equity. We have articulated important paradigms, juxtapose ideas of thought, and had some good fun along the way.

Clearly, we must reimagine social policies to maximize human potential in the 21st century and beyond.

Members of the World Bank, the vote you are about to cast will send a clear message around the world. Regardless of debate tactics, you must vote on your values. I hope you feel it in your heart, and you think it in your mind, that aging is an opportunity, no less than youth itself.

Let us recall the lyrics written by Professor James Weldon Johnson, the first Black professor at New York University and Secretary to NAACP: Lift *every* voice and sing. Lift *every* voice, and sing.

Thank you.

Endnote

¹ I stand here today, similar to Pooja and perhaps some of you in the audience, because of my loving grandparents. Today is somewhat of a miracle.

You see, my early childhood was filled with uncertainty. I lived in two very different cities: I spent my academic months in a city of crime, violence, gangs, drugs, and cults, which permeated every aspect of our community in Albuquerque, New Mexico. And on the other hand, I spent every summer from the age of 5 to 12, in El Paso, Texas, with my maternal grandparents. These summers were filled with love and support, mentorship and excitement. It was strange that El Paso was equally poor as Albuquerque, yet my everyday experiences were radically different because of the presence or absence of a loving adult.

In Albuquerque, the lives of my cousins, uncles, and aunts were cut short: homicide and suicide were real outcomes. Some didn't live past the age of 18. I was fortunate to live with my grandparents full-time from the age of 12 to 16. With them, I was able to study math, science...speech and debate. I know love now, because I felt it then. And I started to dream of a future.

Today, I stand before you at the World Bank, as The James Weldon Johnson Professor at NYU...largely because of the critical role of my maternal grandparents.

So, I am biased. I see aging as an opportunity, as a blessing, just as much as youth itself.

**WRITTEN COMMENTS PREPARED
BY SIR GEORGE ALLEYNE**

Blessings. Blessing – a desirable state – but desirable to whom – self, family, society. One should be careful of the metric you use. We speak of not comparing apples and oranges. But actually, they can be compared if you use the appropriate metric-sugar content. So, beware of the metric.

Let us stick to the moot-the blessings of aging are not necessarily more than youth, but definitely not less than those of youth.

And incidentally, we are not arguing that there are not problems with aging but that does not preclude there being blessings as well.

Ernest and Pooja have shown many blessings in terms of economics and welfare.

In addition, the blessings of aging can be estimated using metrics that represent a desirable state for the individual and are present in greater quantity with aging:

- self-esteem
- emotional stability
- emotional intelligence
- resilience
- social skills and empathy

None of these can be measured using measures of wealth.

Barriers to the realization of these blessings are many and I will focus on the most pernicious-ageism and its various expressions.

First, as you and our opponents know only too well, there is systemic ageism in our societies which denies aging those blessings. There is discrimination based on the stereotyping of individuals or groups based on their chronological age. It regards the elderly as spent and not deserving of attention being paid to them. These negative attitudes are most pernicious in the health and social care settings where the elderly are most vulnerable. Ageism kills!

We see ageism in the belief that the elderly entering the workforce take jobs from the young – the lump of labor fallacy – when the evidence shows that age diversity enhances productivity.

We see it in the belief that aging is equivalent to dependency –I hope but I am not sure that demographers and economists have discarded that pernicious metric of the dependency ratio and focus instead on the contribution of the elderly.

We see it in the assumption of disability as characterizing aging and not recognizing that disability is not necessarily intrinsic to aging and if societies provided the necessary support, such so-called disability would be converted into productive aging.

We see it in the denial of sexuality in aging – the negative portrayals of the elderly expressing what should be considered sexual norms.

Another of the barriers to the enjoyment of blessings is the persistence of the cohort effect- the belief that today's elderly is the same as yesterdays. It should be obvious that aging today is not my grandfather's aging.

Ageism prevents the elderly enjoying the blessings that come with attention to health or the activities through the life course that will allow for healthy aging. It will not foster the potentiating of the human capital to which my colleagues have referred. Healthy and productive longevity will only be possible through attention to the development of healthy practices throughout the life course.

In sum Mr. Chairman, for full realization of proposition that aging is a blessing no less than youth itself, we must:

- a) recognize that the bliss that ageing confers builds upon and is built upon by youth.
- b) Avoid, deny, and rail against those barriers to the enjoyment of those blessings that aging should bring-especially ageism.

And please remember Mark Twain "We should value aging because it is a privilege denied to many."

Team Arguing for the Motion - Wizeaykrs

Pooja Yerramilli, Young Professional, Health, The World Bank

Pooja Yerramilli is a Young Professional in the Health, Nutrition, and Population (HNP) Global Practice for West and Central Africa (HAWH3), and a Board-certified Internal Medicine physician. Immediately prior to joining the World Bank, she practiced medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital while serving as the Policy Advisor for Seed Global Health (a non-profit that focuses on strengthening the global health workforce), through which she advised and led high-level policy engagements with key stakeholders ranging from the US National Security Council to Africa CDC/African Union to Ministries of Health. Previously, she led and contributed to analytical and policy work on social determinants of health, universal health coverage, and non-communicable diseases at the World Health Organization, Harvard University, and several NGOs including the Young Professionals Chronic Disease Network.

She completed her BA in Political Science (concentrating on global health politics & policy) at Yale University; MSc in Health Policy, Planning, and Financing at LSE/LSHTM; and MD at University of Pennsylvania. She completed her residency and fellowship in Internal Medicine/Global Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital (Harvard University).

Ernest Gonzales, Director of the Center for Health and Aging Innovation and the MSW Program, New York University, Silver School of Social Work

Ernest Gonzales is the James Weldon Johnson Professor of Social Work, Director of the MSW Program at NYU Silver School of Social Work, and Director of The Center for Health and Aging Innovation. He is a scholar in the areas of productive aging (employment, volunteering, and caregiving), health equity, discrimination and social policy. His research advances our understanding of the relationships between healthy aging, social determinants of health, productive activities, and intergenerational contexts.

By invitation, Dr. Gonzales serves on the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM), Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education (DBASSE). He has been invited to review grants for the National Institute on Aging, as well as other international federal agencies. He is the Co-Lead of the American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare's Grand Challenge on Advancing Long, Healthy, and Productive Lives. He is also a Senior Fellow of the NYU Aging Incubator, a university-wide initiative bringing together faculty and students from across the University from all disciplines who are involved in the study of aging and its impact on society. He is also a member of the Sloan Research Network on Aging & Work, Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR), the Association for Latina/o Social Work Educators, and Gerontological Society of America.

Dr. Gonzales is a first-gen Latinx gerontologist. His early life experiences growing up in El Paso, Texas with his loving maternal grandparents, parents, and uncles, inspired him to study how we age in a society that aspires for justice and equity but practices systemic racism, sexism, homophobia, and ageism. Prior to coming to NYU Silver, Dr. Gonzales was an Assistant Professor at Boston University's School of Social Work where he received the Peter T. Paul Career Development Award, a highly competitive and prestigious honor given to promising tenure-track scholars. During his doctoral studies, he received the Brown School of Social Work's Dissertation Award and the Teaching Excellence Award for Doctoral Teaching Fellows; the John A. Hartford Pre-Dissertation Fellowship and Dissertation Fellowship; and the Washington University Chancellor's Fellowship. He received the Rosalyn Tough Award in Sociology from Hunter College while obtaining his Bachelor's Degree in Sociology.

George Alleyne, Former Director, PAHO and Former UNSG's Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean Region

Sir George Alleyne, a native of Barbados, graduated in medicine from the University College of the West Indies in 1957 as Gold medalist of his class. He began his academic career pursuing research in the Tropical Metabolism Research Unit for his Doctorate in Medicine from the University of London. He was appointed Professor of Medicine in the University of the West Indies (UWI) in 1972 and Chair of the Department of Medicine in 1976. He joined the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), Regional Office of the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1981, became Assistant Director in 1990 and Director on 1 February 1995 and after re-election in 1998, completed a second four-year term on 31 January 2003. In 2003 he was elected Director Emeritus. From February 2003 until December 2010, he was the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean. From 2003 to 2017 he was Chancellor of the University of the West Indies and a visiting professor at the Bloomberg School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins University also from 2003 to 2017. He is now Chancellor Emeritus.

Mainly from his period in academia, Sir George has over 150 publications in peer reviewed journals as well as numerous scientific abstracts and conference presentations dealing with problems of renal physiology and biochemistry and clinical medicine. During his term as Director of PAHO and subsequently, he has dealt mainly with issues of health policy. He has given several named lectures, many speeches and presentations in international fora in which he has dealt with issues such as equity in health, HIV/AIDS, non-communicable diseases, and the basis for international cooperation in health. He has addressed the complexity of the interaction between health and development on several occasions and has also been actively involved with several aspects of Caribbean health and the problems the region faces. He has been a member of numerous international Committees, Working Groups and Boards dealing with the issues above.

Sir George has received numerous awards in recognition of his work, including honorary degrees, prestigious decorations from many countries of the Americas and national and international honors. In 1990, he was made Knight Bachelor by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II for his services to Medicine. In 2001, he was awarded the Order of the Caribbean Community, the highest honor that can be conferred on a Caribbean national.

He is married to Sylvan Chen and they have three children.

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