

A Conversation with Ashton Applewhite by Awakin Call Editors

Throughout her career, New York-based author and activist, Ashton Applewhite has written about a wide variety of subjects including Antarctica, astrophysics, and a village in Laos that got access to the internet via a bicycle-powered computer. Since 2007, she has been writing about aging and ageism at ThisChairRocks.com, and has authored a book by the same name. She's also the voice of "Yo, Is This Ageist?" and has been widely recognized by the New York Times as an expert on ageism. What follows is the edited transcript of an Awakin Call with Ashton. You can listen to the full recording [here](#).

Pavi Mehta: Ashton, what brought you to where you are today, and what drew your mission?

Ashton Applewhite: From my nutty biography, it is obvious that I am one of those people that could never figure out what to be when she grew up. You know I wrote a book about women and divorce, because I was getting divorced. Then twenty years later, it dawned on me that I was well past the midpoint of life, and I realized I was afraid. I'm kind of a bull-by-the-horns kind of person, so the catalyst for the project was a comment of my partner's mother when she was in her eighties. She and her husband are booksellers. She said, "People are always asking us when are you going to retire."

I liked the idea. It was very tangible and upbeat, and I started interviewing people over eighty who worked. Everything I learned about these remarkable people I was meeting and from my own research completely contradicted all these notions I had about what it would like to be that old, about immobility, about the way you move through the world, the way you see yourself.

I assumed that older people were depressed because they were really old and going to die soon. In fact, older people have better rates of mental health than young or middle aged people because of neurological changes that occur in the brain. It was hard for me to believe that people were less afraid of dying as they got older. I had just assumed that it must get scarier and scarier to feel the shadow of the grim reaper across your shoulder. I didn't really believe it until I learned why. It is a function of the fact that the awareness that time is short doesn't fill people with dread; it makes them spend their time more wisely.

If all you do that day is have a moment with your grandchild, or have a wonderful conversation, or sit in the sun, or look at the mountains, then we are able to take more satisfaction in that. That enables us to live in the moment the way children do because they don't know any other way to be, and that is what makes people happier.

There were a thousand things that took me by surprise in a positive way, partly because my perception of old age was so grim. The obvious one-word answer was ageism--pervasive discrimination against older people and ignorance in our own heads. It is our attitude towards our own age and aging that our society has yet to question. We grow up thinking that is just the way things are, but it doesn't have to be that way.

Pavi: In your writing you talk about how it doesn't make sense to discriminate against the group that we aspire to join. The thought that everyone would prefer not to die young and everyone would also prefer not to grow old. For many of us ageism is a new word. Can you explain it a little bit more?

Ashton: The dictionary definition is stereotyping and discrimination on the basis of age, which I would broaden to say it is anytime we constrain or judge what we think someone is capable of doing as a person on the basis of age. It is any judgment on the basis of age. Ageism also affects teenagers because people often think teenagers are reckless and can't be trusted. It's ageist when we make any kind of assumption about what a person is capable of on the basis of age.

Stereotyping is at the root of all discrimination. Any generalization about a group of people is of course inherently false, but especially when it comes to age because as we get older and are shaped by life experiences we grow more different from one another.

Pavi: Can you bring it to life for us in how that prejudice plays out in the world?

Ashton: It plays out in a thousand ways. In the internalized way, it plays out when we think we are less deserving. For example, it is one of the reasons why so much elder abuse goes unreported. Something between 1 in 9 or 1 in 12 cases, they estimate, goes unreported. Part of it is because older people are segregated from us. Part of it is because older people internalize. Older people can be the most ageist of all because they have had a lifetime of these messages, that somehow they have become second class citizens in this society.

It is conflated with sexism. Many women talk about reaching a certain age and feeling like they have become invisible. If you look around at our advertisement and billboards, we very much equate youth with beauty. Why do we think wrinkles are ugly? Wrinkles are the road map of your experience etched on your face.

Workplace discrimination is huge. I can't think of an arena where it doesn't take place. Movies and television--look how few roles there are for older people. Give me an arena, and I can think of a specific example. Look at dating sites. I'm referring specifically to the statistics from OKCupid, that show that men always want to date eighteen-year-olds even when they are eighty. Men are missing out on an awful lot if they are only looking to date very young women. It is a huge subject.

Pavi: You use the phrase, "youth is equated with beauty." I remember reading a statistic that the prime age for marketers to target is the 15 to 35 years old.

Ashton: People over 50 control something like 70% of the disposable income in the United States, and yet, marketers are still marketing to younger groups. Another example are those marketing checklists where you check off "are you 18-24?" or "24-32." They stop at 65. So everyone over 65 buys the same thing. Most of those people will live to be 85 and 90. Can you imagine making a set of assumptions about a group of people from 20 to 45? They are all going to buy the same stuff.

Pavi: Can you walk us through some of those assumptions? I remember reading in one of your interviews, you talk about the percentage of people who are in homes in America.

Ashton: I've been thinking about what my most terrible fears were. There is this classic cliché that you are going to end up drooling in some hideous linoleum hallway with a whole bunch of other people in wheelchairs. The actual number of people over 65 in nursing homes, not assisted living, but nursing homes, is four percent. Those statistics are dropping. Most of that four percent are people who have dementia and need institutional care. The real epidemic here is anxiety over memory loss. Twenty percent of the population experiences no cognitive decline at all. Most of us do, especially in that maddening tip-of-the-tongue can't remember the name of someone. We lose a certain amount of processing speed, but the vast majority of people can think just fine, and get through life absolutely perfectly on the brain power that they have. When you think that dementia lies ahead when you can't find your keys, you think, "Oh my God, I'm coming down with Alzheimer's." That is very rarely the case. I used to make senior moment jokes because I thought they were cute, until it dawned on me, when I lost the car keys in high school, I didn't call it a junior moment. Ageism means that we blame on age all sorts of things that are not aging related. When your back hurts, maybe it is because you gardened or because you moved and all the young people who helped you move are stiff and sore as well.

Pavi: When we are talking about those types of assumptions, we have this narrative around the horrors that are to come. I've studied about blindness in my own work, and in India, they found an interesting correlation between when someone went blind, especially in rural India. It is not just their sight that they lose, but often their livelihood, their place in their family, and their relationship to the rest of the community. It becomes a loss of dignity, social status, and relationship. Life expectancy after blindness could be reduced as much as to two or three years. A blind person was looked upon as a mouth with no hands. Connecting this to our idea or our prejudices around aging, does it have a feedback loop?

Ashton: There is a new study that attitudes towards aging have an absolute, actual measurable effect in how our brains and our bodies age. People who think that growing old is going to be a consignment to uselessness and loneliness actually recover less slowly from severe disability. Age and disability are very conflated in a way that our society does not want to look at. Much of this prejudice also operates against people with disabilities of any age. A lot of that has to do with the extreme generalization in the United States of independence. There are myths that people are self-reliant, when no one is ever self-reliant. I have to say it is chastening to hear the story take place in India where I have a romanticized view that perhaps in rural society, there would be more community care and looking out for people because in the US asking for help of any sort is profoundly stigmatized. It makes it much harder to get through life. There is this idea that if you just have a stiff upper lip and a positive attitude, you are going to do okay. A positive attitude is a great thing, but it is not going to help you get around institutional discrimination. As you know, giving help is also a remarkable experience. It is not a one way transaction.

Pavi: I feel like we need to be re-educated or unlearn things because language plays this insidious role. In ageism, are there any language-related things we've been unaware of?

Ashton: There's a lot of ugly things we call older people--coots, old farts, and

geezers--that go completely unremarked because we haven't yet really started thinking about ageism as a society. We are aware that it is not okay to say racist or sexist things, but people literally don't realize that it is no more acceptable to criticize someone on the basis of age than on the basis of anything else about themselves, I think the most important thing to think about in language is because we live in a youth-oriented society, we tend to use young to equate with good things and old with bad things. At work, if people are not paying attention to them or asking for their ideas, they feel useless. They feel insignificant. You can feel any of these things when you are a teenager, and you are working with older people and they are not asking for your opinion, No one stays young, and that would be hideous and a nightmare from science fiction if we could. When we say "I feel young," we mean I feel energetic, sexy, or beautiful. These are all properties that we can possess at any age. I would urge people to watch out for that way of speaking about things, because it is false. You will notice that we don't have good words to describe older people, partly because we have gained thirty years of life in one century. It is not our ageism; it's a huge social change that we haven't figured out yet how to deal with. The only acceptable thing to call older people is older people, and that is pretty clunky. So I've shortened it to a noun. I call older people "olders," and younger people "youngers." I don't like the term "elders." I also don't like the term "seniors" because it implies that younger people are junior or lesser, and that is not okay. When you have the "-er" at the end, it reinforces the notion that age is a continuum. We know now that gender is a continuum, yet we are hung up on this bogus, punitive, false old/young binary. Everyone is terrified of being on the wrong side, and it segregates us and fills us with dread. This is completely unnecessary because you are always older than lots of people and younger than lots of other people. It is important to break down the old/young binary because binaries are not our friends.

Pavi: I remember introducing another speaker and referring to her as an elder, which within a lot of indigenous communities are thought of as the keepers of wisdom, and it's meant as a term of honor and yet...

Ashton: It's meant as an honorific, absolutely.

Pavi: ...and yet the person receiving the term took it (good-naturedly) as being called old.

Ashton: It shouldn't be an insult. It's like when you see people cringe when you mention how long we've known each other. Why on earth wouldn't you take enormous pleasure in how long you've known each other?

Pavi: We talked about marketing and how that's targeted toward youth, and I wonder about the aesthetics of aging. Why is that something we haven't created language to or we haven't created a narrative around? I don't think it's just a marketing problem; we're putting a dollar value on things that are priceless.

Ashton: There's an enormous market for anti-aging products. If they can convince you that you look fat, ugly or old, they can sell you a lot of stuff to remedy it. If they tell you you need to do brain training games because you couldn't remember the movie you saw last week, that's a market. Aging is modified like an illness, You raise an important question. My biggest ask is to widen their notion of beauty. Grey hair can be the most gorgeous stuff, and yet we cover it up. I have this fantasy of letting our hair go grey so that women and men can do it as an act of solidarity. Imagine how liberating to look around and say one, whoa we are legion and second of all, we're beautiful. Why are we so terrified of this basic signifier?

Pavi: Is it true that women have more anxiety around their age and that they do more to deceive people around their age?

Ashton: I think there's no question about it. By the way, I dyed my hair white. I still have brown hair but I dyed it white last year just to see what it was like. I figured I should walk the talk.

Pavi: What was that like?

Ashton: You know I have to say it was a wacky experiment because I'm one of those women who has never dyed her hair, and it was cool to change my appearance that way. I didn't notice any difference in the way people treated me. Now it's sort of white on top and brown on the sides because I like to keep it confusing. I don't want to make it easy for people to make judgements about me in that way. I'm going to make it as hard as I can.

Pavi: I was reading a chapter of your book where you talk about the kids versus the canes debate and how that's almost the wrong framing where it's a zero sum game where if you take care of the olders then you can't afford to send your kids to school?

Ashton: The big picture is resource allocation. We spend almost as much on our military as all the other nations of the world combined. We don't restore our highways either. The resources are not inherently scarce. We are an enormously wealthy nation. It is how we choose to allocate them. We have to spend money on kids or older people. Whether they're going to die soon or not is utterly irrelevant from an ethical point of view. People have the right to stay alive no matter how old they are and have the best quality of life.

Pavi: Are there movements to shift the structures that underlie this? Our life spans have increased, and we have more active and able older people than ever before in history but our structures are still dated to the old reality.

Ashton: Part of that is what sociologists call structural lag. It just takes time for culture to catch up with change. We have this idea that you go to school and then have kids and work and retire. Aside from the fact that that's forty years of retirement if you retire at 65, it just doesn't make sense anymore. Perhaps take longer to complete your education and figure out what you want to do and then your peak hours would be later when your children are older and out of the house and don't need hands-on care. Then move out of working more gradually so you can pass on what you know and continue to have the meaning and social contacts that are so important at work. You can continue to save towards retirement. I will say that you can have all of the policy wonks and all the educators, but schools aren't very friendly to older people. Continuing education is not integrated in a good way into universities, and that needs to change. If we don't change our underlying attitudes towards aging, all these other changes will just be band-aids. Back to beauty, if I can make an analogy. It's a big act to broaden our notions of beauty, but beauty is a lot like fashion. Here's something I came across very early in my research that hit me like a ton of bricks. In early America, there was a gerontocracy where older people held all the power and that's not a good thing either. You want a balance of power. The older men were the most powerful. Think about what people wore in Colonial America--white wigs, stiff frock coats, and stockings that exposed the lower legs. Those are fashions that flatter the older body. Fashion now with its spandex and crop tops, flatters the younger body. The point not being that one is

better. We can have both, but they are malleable. These ideas change, and we are capable of revising these ideas in a more sensible and egalitarian way.

Pavi: It's fascinating to think about how history and power dynamics shift, and how in tribal cultures and indigenous cultures, the older people were the keepers of wisdom. There were no books. There was no internet that you could go to.

Ashton: Yes, things change. That took a tremendous hit when it became possible to record information in other ways.

Pavi: Yet, information isn't necessarily a replacement for wisdom and for lived experience.

Ashton: It is absolutely not, although I will say that wisdom is a trope that I'm a little leery about because I don't like any value-labeling language around aging. Aging confers experience,. The more experience you have, the more likely you are to be wise in certain areas. You learn that you really can't change people. You learn certain things, but that does not necessarily translate into wisdom. On the other hand, we have all met wise children, Again, wisdom is not inherently a function of chronological age. I think that we should respect everyone. Little kids get no respect, and they deserve to be respected and listened to as well. Ideally, we need to create a society where unique attributes are valued. There is a ton of research showing that diverse teams function better. You draw on a broader variety of experiences, and diverse groups listen to people more and pay more attention to what people say, Every time you read an article about diversity, it says race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, blah blah, and age isn't on the list yet. Why isn't age a criterion for diversity? We are going to make it one. That is one of the things that is going to provoke larger structural shifts. When you have older people on the team thinking about it and being consulted, then solutions people come up with work for them as well. That is a little ageist to say as well, because it is not just older people can only understand their own experiences. I saw a hilarious cartoon the other day of a mom saying to her teenager slouched on the sofa, "No, it's you who don't understand ME, because I've been 15 and you have never been 45."

Pavi: I love how this conversation is shining a light on my own inbuilt prejudices that I do have this unconscious bias that elders are the keepers of wisdom.

Ashton: Some are, but not just because they are old. They are wise, but not because they are old.

Pavi: Attaching any kind of value labels to the aging process is a slippery slope. People talk about people who have aged well. We do make judgments on the process. Is that problematic too?

Ashton: If you look at those values, they have to do with being conventionally youthfully attractive and physically active. Those are not values that are hospitable to the aging process. If you want to be able to come to a good decision, which is certainly what makes thinking valuable, older people are better at that as a rule. It may take them longer to come up with a decision, but they are sifting through more information. They are more likely to be aware of social cues in the environment than younger people. I would never say older people make better decisions than younger people, but age confers those attributes that make that possible some of the time.

Pavi: In the process of your research, you've seen people aging in all different ways.

Ashton: Sure, but no more so than anyone who walked down the street or attends a family reunion. We've all seen aging in all different kinds of ways.

Pavi: What has it equipped you with when you want to approach the adventure of the years that lie ahead?

Ashton: Needless to say, I'm something of an outlier. At the very beginning before I started speaking in public and before I had to write a book, I thought, "If all I get out of this is that I feel so much better about my own age and aging, that is huge." That is what I hope to bestow upon people. I have written a manifesto. I also have a consciousness raising guide on my website which downloadable called "Who me ageist?" which is a tool. I hope that some small percentage of people will download it, and will start consciousness raising groups. Activists are always a minuscule proportion of the population. I hope that people will arrive at that on their own towards an awareness that this is a social justice issue that needs to be confronted the way we are confronting sexism, racism and homophobia.

If all I achieve, and all the people who listen to me, is that we stop being so afraid, and instead, look at old age in a more informed way that is enough. The reason I'm optimistic about that is because I'm 63. We are brainwashed to dread every birthday after 30. When you reach those birthdays, it is a drag that aspects of your body perform less well, but there is a lot about getting older that is wonderful and so much fun. I think everyone knows this, even people who haven't thought about it politically at all. They are like "Gee, I hit 50 and you know what, I'm still getting laid. You know what I can go on a longer vacation. You know what I have this fantastic network of friends that I have known all these years." Life isn't this hollow version of all the fun I used to have when I was young. Why are all those messages around me saying something different? When you realize that they are wrong, that is hugely liberating, and it makes you really happy.

Pavi: I'm thinking about how our experiences with aging and our perspectives on aging connects to our ability to meet impermanence. Can you speak to that a little bit?

Ashton: That is a huge question, and my first answer is that I think it depends a lot on the individual. Everything changes, of course. There is a wonderful geriatrician named Bill Thomas who talks about the tyranny of still, as in still walking, still running. That's another ageist bit of language. Try to cut "still" out. When it refers to something like driving, like working, which most people do. She's not still driving; she's driving. This tyranny of still, that we get to a certain age and we rightly respect the attitude/the ability to adapt to and learn from what life has to teach us, and all of a sudden because of ageism, the objective shifts in our consumerist society to cling on to everything so that it stays the same. That is just nutty.

I think a tremendous amount of the anxiety and dread around whether you are aging successfully is "Oh my God, things are slipping." That means I am failing; instead of acknowledging and embracing the fact that it is not slippage. It is a natural process. Aging is living. It happens everyday of our life. It is not just something old people do to be annoying. That is another annoying thing, the adjective "aging." Why are Boomers aging and no one else? Why are movie stars aging? Everyone is aging.

Pavi: The baby is aging.

Ashton: I have bad news: your baby is aging right before your eyes. The point is our life is transitory, and when we stop denying aging and acknowledge that it is inevitable and

even has some kind of good things about it. You are not wasting this tremendous amount of energy and money on stuff that isn't going to work and makes you feel bad about yourself.

Pavi: I like it. I have a beloved friend who is in her late eighties, and I remember being impressed by the fact that she said, "You know when I was 45 I thought 45 was the best age to be. When I was 50, I thought that was the best age to be." Every year has been the best year of her life, and every age has been the best age.

Ashton: Early on in the writing process, I went to New Mexico and interviewed this wonderful artist named Marsha Muth. She was tethered to an oxygen tank. She couldn't teach anymore, but she had discovered folk art painting in her 50s. She said, "I have to say that I think my 80s were even better than my 70s were. I tell people, don't fear aging."

There I am with my reporter's notebook, very new to this, and the thought that your 80s could be first of all okay, second of all, better than your 70s -- even though her life was pretty constrained.

Pavi: We are already lagging behind in catching up to the changes that have transpired in terms of more people living longer and healthier lives into their eighties. We have it figured out on so many fronts, and on the other hand, we have Google trying to solve death. Have you thought about that far out?

Ashton: All ageism takes root in denial of aging. Denying that you are mortal is the extreme form of denying that you are old and that you are aging. Ratzinger wrote a conservative post in which he said that not dealing with dying is the way of not dealing with living. I was startled to agree with him about anything, but I thought that was a really good way to put it.

The fact that life is finite gives life meaning. The fact that your days are growing shorter enables the old to live in the moment and take such pleasure. This whole testosterone-driven, science-driven "we are going to beat this sucker [death]" is wrong-headed philosophically and biomedically. We don't understand the basic cell functions. We do absolutely need to learn more about the biology of aging. It is incredibly important, because so much old age is new, and research into aging is underfunded, and that needs to change as well. We are learning all kinds of ways to slow the aging process and stay healthy longer, but that is different from pretending that we are staying young and are going to die.

Birju: I'm curious on your thoughts or research on aging in other cultures and perhaps in indigenous cultures as well as your thoughts on how folks have had an evolving relationship with aging. Is there health or value in that nostalgia approach or is it a move towards progress across the continuum of time?

Ashton: No, I think there is no march towards progress. I would say the march of global capitalism is a pernicious global force that as long as our ability to contribute economically in conventional forms, then the most valuable thing about us then the old and the young are disadvantaged. I have not researched native cultures, so I speak with no expertise. I think wherever there is actual physical community in any kind of a village or a smaller community, there are useful tasks for older people to do right to the end of

their lives until they become bedridden. Everyone has contact with people of all ages. When you aren't segregated and have contact with other people, prejudice can't crop up. As we become more urban, that is probably not a positive factor.

If we can make sure to make and keep friends of all ages and to value each person's contribution and be tolerant and embrace the different forms of contribution we will be better off. Older people contribute an enormous amount of volunteer services. It is not counted. Literally, not counted. It is not counted economically, and it is not counted in terms of value. We need to work on changing those values too.

Mish: I'm a 68-year young woman who embraces her gray hair and wrinkles and I want to salute you for dispelling the myths that exist around aging. So much of what you said resonates for me. I'm constantly posting at Kindspring.org the joy that has come into my life as I'm aging. I wonder who perpetuated all these myths?

Ashton: There are aspects of aging that are really hard. We are afraid of running out of money and getting sick and ending up alone, and those fears are legitimate and real.

Mish: Yes, they are and I can't say that I'm happy about all the aches and pains that I'm experiencing, but all the bad press about it puts people in that mindset of dread.

Ashton: The bad things are real. The point is that the good things don't get equal time.

Mish: I'm braver, more courageous, more comfortable in my skin. I'm still learning. Thank you so much.

Ashton: Can I ask you a favor? Consider calling yourself 68 years old instead of 68 years young? It sounds like a denial of age.

Mish: I didn't make that connection. This 68 year old woman bids you goodbye.

Ashton: I will just say for everybody that my website is thischairrocks.com. I have a blog there where all this research is available so check it out.

Birju: The next question comes from online. "What is your advice for those who are ashamed for exhibiting child-like tendencies such as being called 'not acting their age?'" This is from Vasu in Washington, DC.

Ashton: Ageist language--"age appropriate, act your age." We all age differently--mentally, physically, socially, so there is no such thing from a literal point of view as acting your age. Some 80 year olds are running marathons, and some are bedridden. Act your age is also a way to constrain behavior. I have this "Yo, is this ageist" tumblr. You can send stuff in, and the questions I get a lot are like "should an older woman wear short skirts?"

Older women should wear whatever the hell they want to wear, and so should younger people. You should do and be the way you want to be. I think it is a mistake to try and act "young," because if you going to a rock concert is not fun for you anymore, don't do it. If that still sounds like fun and you like that group, do not not do it, because you're the oldest people in the room. It is really important to stand up and represent something that feels right to you and something that you want to try or keep doing

regardless of age.

Alissa: I'm Alissa in Seattle, and I'm 61. I love everything that you are saying and have experienced so much ageism in our culture. I was listening to what you were saying about words. It's comments, tiny innuendos. Some friends have a first Friday of the month party. I was telling a friend this a couple of years ago, and his comment was "Oh that is great. I want to do that. We've got a lot of young people in my neighborhood." I was like, "Eric, the people at this party are like infants to 80 year olds. It has nothing to do with age."

I also was thinking about people who have traveled to China who have aches and pains and feel elderly stopped feeling that when they were there because of the view of age is different in China. I think there is so much worry about what other people think. You do what you want to do.

Ashton: That gets easier as we get older and more self-confident.

Alissa: In some ways, yes, but there are so many. I have an elderly friend who would apologize because she is so old. I actually heard myself doing that. I've been recently listening to a book called, Thrive. It was talking about how in Denmark the fears of not having money and being thrown out are so real. Ageism is tied to the money and the self-reliance. I don't think there is anything wrong with self-reliance in itself. It is that there is a combination between taking care of yourself and being aware that you are with other people.

Ashton: And that there is no shame in asking for help.

Alissa: Right. We are all in it together.

Ashton: That is the bottom line. Everyone is going to get old. When you discriminate against an older person, you are discriminating against your future self. I want to commend you about the block party, on saying something to the guy, because nothing changes unless we call it out.

I have a really good suggestion for people. What you want to do is get the person to reflect for a minute. For example, I went into a store to get a shirt to go dancing in and the saleswoman said, "Oh, with sleeves, of course." I was like, "No, I'm going to get sweaty," which was not a learning moment for her. What I should have said is "Why would you think that?" Just say to the person, "why would you think just young people?" Throw it back on them, so they have to think why they made that assumption.

Alissa: But at the same time, you can always go back. You know because a lot of times you don't think on your feet. My mom's partner was training to go to the Galapagos and he fell on the treadmill and had a brain injury. He's 86 and at the hospital, they were going to take him off life-support. There was a doctor that said he won't get better. Well, now he is getting better.

Ashton: We didn't even touch on ageism in medicine. If a doctor ever says to you, "what do you expect at your age," get a new doctor. It is important to know that even aggressive medical interventions are just as effective on older bodies assuming underlying basic organ functions.

Birju: The next question is online from Vasu in Washington DC. He says, "my sense is that

the LGBT community has been able to resist the pressures of ageism far better than the rest of society. What are your thoughts on how the LGBT community has influenced society regarding ageism?"

Ashton: I am not an expert in this arena. My daughter happens to be gay and I remember saying to her hopefully, "Is there any chance that there is less lookism which relates to age?" She said, "Absolutely not. Gay girls all want to be the cute girl at the bar just like everyone else."

Ageism is a bigger problem for the LGBT community because before gay marriage was legal and more gay people had families, they tended to have less of a family support system to fall back on. Homophobia in combination with ageism is a double whammy. I think the most fantastic thing that the gay rights movement has done for us is to show in an incredibly short amount of time, you get people thinking differently. Look how far the gay rights movement has come in just 15 years. I think that has done a lot to raise the idea of fairness. Marriage equality--I say why not age equality?

The gay rights movement has done a lot to pave the way and show ageism activists strategies to give us hope that people's ideas about something so squirm-inducing as sex can change in our society. We have a tremendous amount to learn from them about how to raise a struggle for civil rights.

Birju: Can you share a bit more about your own journey with this aging process and how you have transformed through your inquiries?

Ashton: I would say that I really did go through a tremendous change. I've been working on this for a long time. At the beginning, it was a project about older people who worked, and I did a book proposal about how work helps you in all these different way, but it was boring and I knew it was boring. I spent several years reading and researching stuck at this point where I thought if all I get out of this is if I feel so much better that's got to be enough. To acknowledge that those feelings I was having were legitimate, were not anomalies, but it was obvious early on that ageism was the reason that society at large didn't know these things. I got angry. I guess I'm an activist by temperament.

The turning point for me professionally was coincidental. A friend of mine that runs an art festival has a theme every year, and she picked aging because she had been listening to me. All her friends said don't do that or you'll lose your whole subscriber base because aging is so depressing. She ended up tripling her subscriber base because people are so hungry for this conversation. It affirms something they know in their guts. She asked me to give an opening monologue. I had practically never spoken in my life. I certainly thought I would never become a public speaker. I put down all the smart things I had come across or had written into a talk, and it became the germ of a talk that I continue to give. That was really transformative for me to say, "Oh, I get it. I can be an evangelist. This is what I'm here for."

I'm not going to reform social security or medicare or make doctors less ageist; I'm going to sound the horn for the need for all of us to question these views. I feel incredibly lucky to have such a strong sense of purpose now because the other thing that correlates very strongly to preventing cognitive decline or forestalling it is a sense of having a purpose. That bodes well for all you listeners who I would describe as a purpose driven bunch of people.

Birju: The next question comes from Albert. Do you have any insights or referrals

regarding the work men are doing for themselves and each other to address this issue?

Ashton: That is a good question, and I have to say I have not broken out men's experience. I know that for many white men, ageism is the first form of discrimination that they encounter. I know that men are at a disadvantage in the sense that the most important factor in aging well is having a strong social network. Women tend to be more the gatekeepers of that, and, I would also say, they tend to have a stronger circle to network.

I think men have an advantage tactically in that men grow distinguished while women get ugly. Men do not feel the devaluing of their physical selves and sexual selves in the social sphere anywhere near as rapidly. This will trap you longer in the "tyranny of still." That you can "still" x-y-x; things aren't going to change. The sooner we all acknowledge that it is inevitable. The phrase I use is "becoming an old person in training." To acknowledge that the older you is out there and to form an empathic link to that rather than do what we do when we put on anti-aging creams or have cosmetic surgery. We pretend that older is somehow other than us. Old people are separate from us which is irrational if you think about it. But prejudice is not about rationality. If you become an "old person in training," you say, "Oh, in training!" It is still however far off I need it to be psychologically, but it is still there. It is real, and I'm going to acknowledge that. That is going to be part of my identity as I move through life.

Birju: What are your thoughts on this idea of bias, the thought that younger people who may hear your message and say, "Oh, that's coming from an older." How would you break through that perceived bias that prevents that message from being received?

Ashton: There is logic which is not the most effective way to break down bias, sadly. Which is "Dude, you're going to be old someday." Or "do you really think that I've never rode a skateboard?" You can try that, of course, because it is true.

It is hard to look ahead. We are engineered to live in the present. Our human lifespan ended at 30 until the Paleolithic era. We are bioengineered to avoid present threat. It is hard to save money. It is hard to be sensible. It is really hard to imagine that your skin will wrinkle and that you will totter. What I would say to a younger person is, "have you ever felt discriminated against on the basis of your age? How is that different from judging someone on the basis of the color of their skin or whether they sleep with men or sleep with women?"

The next generation are much more ethnically diverse in the United States which is fantastic. The whole concept of diversity is much more ingrained. People are aware of it. I think age is just as legitimate a criterion for diversity as all those other things. It is no more right to discriminate on the basis of it. If you ever felt that you didn't get an opportunity or someone didn't entrust you with a responsibility because they didn't think you could handle it, that is not right. That is ageism. We need to work against it all our lives for the benefit of people of all ages.

Pavi: I read in one of your interviews that ageism has the dubious distinction of being very universal.

Ashton: It is one prejudice we will all face. If you feel like you are the only "goth cat lover" in your town, it is easier to feel prejudice rather than something as vague and huge as age that is happening to everyone. We really need to mobilize against it especially in view of the aging of the world's population. There is an unprecedented enormous demographic

shift that represents this amazing accumulation of social capital. We need to know how to use it.

Pavi: I think you have enthused all of us. We've all joined the ranks of "old people in training." What can we do to support the work you are doing in the world?

Ashton: I would say the best thing you can do is download the consciousness raising guide and also to read my manifesto against ageism. You can subscribe to my email list at thischairrocks.com. It is funny and interesting, and it has everything I know about how ageism operates. It is called This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism. I also have a very active This Chair Rocks Facebook page.

Pavi: I wanted to close with a quote from you: "All aging is successful because otherwise you are dead. Living needs aging. There is no best or right way to age. Each of us will make different accommodations and find different meanings." We've all learned a great deal from this call and will continue to follow your work with interest.

For more inspiration join this week's Awakin Call with Arathi Kuber: Healing through Acceptance and Forgiveness. RSVP and more details [here](#).