

We are all sixty-five

While standing outside a train station in Normandy last month, a series of large ads caught my eye. Leftover from the ceremonies marking last year's seventieth anniversary of the D-Day invasion, the ads featured photos of modern youths, transposed over images of fellow youths, scrambling onto the beaches in 1944 with the statement: "*On a tous 70 ans*" – "We are all seventy." I was struck by this statement. What does it mean? How can I be 70, too?

I previously saw D-Day – and, really, any historical event – as something experienced only by one generation, whose first-hand memories expire with their deaths, and second-hand and third-hand memories take their place. The memories tumble down the hills of time, losing their sharpness as the decades pass. However, the tagline "we are all seventy" really made me think. I suddenly felt very close to D-Day, imagining myself on those beaches.

As "we are all seventy" made me look backwards, and see myself in those young men, I realized that I can also look forward. I am not very different from someone who is seventy or ninety years-old. The ads forced me to experience a simultaneity of ages – all of the ages I have been and may someday be. Quite suddenly, the linear trajectory of time and age was squashed, and I could feel all of my past, present, and future ages in an immediate consciousness. This ad certainly made an impact on me, and I thought of what it would mean to apply this awareness to our American consciousness.

Intergenerational divisions are an unspoken constant in American society. Generations are mere constructions that order social and cultural history, but their labels leech into our psyches. As school and work sort us by age, these separations reinforce a false distance between ages. Each generation is huddled close in their immediate matters. While adolescents feel removed from their parents, and adults from children, this division is strongly felt between seniors and the rest of the population. It is as though when one enters old age, there is a sudden distillation into stereotypes – dim, childlike, stubborn, old-fashioned, naïve. These labels chronically diminish the elderly. A person with dimensions and uniqueness as rich as any other person is cruelly painted flat, removed, and discarded in society's corner.

As the French sought to bring their generations together through a reminder of our shared human experiences, I write now to issue a similar call to Americans. With Medicare and Social Security insolvent and uncertain for the elderly and the future elderly, it has never been more critical to recognize that *we are all sixty-five*.

That, of course, is the age at which an American generally becomes entitled to these essential social insurance programs. Medicare and Social Security are precious resources to which, no matter your background or means, as an American, one is entitled. All of us, whether a president or a plumber, are made equal by this shared right of access to a measure of dignity and wellbeing in advanced age.

While we may feel unequal and set apart as a result of our ages in any given moment, ultimately everyone who turns sixty-five once turned five, twenty-five, and forty-five as well. The person you are now is the same person who may be sixty-five one day. In the reminder that "we are all

sixty-five,” I see the reinforcement of the fundamental unifying wonder of these social insurance programs that serve not only one group among us but all of us, especially as Social Security and Medicare face dwindling funding and the threat of privatization. I believe that if we could engage in this simple exercise of thinking beyond our immediate ages, and imagine ourselves at age sixty-five, these programs would not be so endangered.

There is a tragic deficit of understanding between generations, an inability to see oneself in another. Although we may be experiencing one chronological and emotional age at a given moment, we must look at the full span of our lives and see that we are all ages at once, as the ad in Normandy taught me with its five powerful words.

We are all sixty-five, and we are all in this together.