

A captivating rumba sees this song brimming with the gratefulness and love its young singer, Getter Jaani, dedicates to her great-grandmother. She says that it was her great-grandmother who taught her to see the good in every situation, to keep her head held high and to walk on with a smile. The warmth of this deeply felt gratitude of a great-granddaughter could be felt through the screen. It was a truly beautiful thing to see.

The song's chorus stuck in my head for quite some time afterwards. There was something about it – albeit not in the music – that just didn't sit right. “We all get old...” But do we? Or do we just get older? Although it might seem like pure semantics, it in fact highlights the attitudes and bias and fears that aging generates in us today. In days gone by, of course, old people were not considered ugly: they were cared for and respected until the cosmos led them across the River Styx...

We nod away in agreement whenever people talk about children and how we have to ensure they have a safe and happy childhood. But how caring and safe and mature a society actually is is reflected in how equal its attitudes are towards children and the elderly. It was for their protection, and the protection of other members of the community in need of care – the ill, the injured, the disabled – that a way of living together was established thousands of years ago which would eventually lead to nationhood. Is that something we've forgotten?

Aging with dignity is a right shared by everyone, even if it's not written into our constitution. I'm not talking about money – there's no exchanging euros for human decency. But what can we do to ensure that getting old is an ordinary part of life that is just as enjoyable as when we were teenagers, just as exciting as our adult years, and just as safe as our childhood? This is a subject I got into a few months ago at the conference marking the 100th anniversary of the Estonian Females Students Society.

“The most important thing is to help other people,” said Dr. Maret Truuvert, an 82-year-old dentist living in Canada and one of the alumni of the society, summarising her stance. “I see that older people in Estonia have started doing handicrafts, which is a great way to spend your time and sometimes earn a little extra on top of your pension. But what truly brings a smile to the eyes, and what truly gives the gift of dignity, is giving to others.” With those simple words this wonderful woman explained why older people in certain countries are happier and more amiable and why others are less so, wallowing in solitude between their four walls, as if hiding from the rest of the world.

This is exactly what I got to thinking about when I visited a school in Shanghai as part of our state visit to China. While I was impressed by the well thought-out school catering, which very much supported good health and learning, it was the fact that hobby education there was structured entirely around volunteering that stuck in my mind. It was mostly left up to grandparents, who led these groups according to whatever it was they could do. There were around 150 of these groups at this school of 500 students, ranging from handicrafts to foreign languages, and even an anatomy group led by a retired surgeon. All of this was free for the students, with the school providing whatever materials were needed. It wasn't important how many students were in a group, either. Effectiveness took on another meaning: such deep interest and dedication and enjoyment were generated by this initiative. Everyone was happy – the kids were being looked after and educated, and their grandparents had roles within the school that were respected by the children, the teachers and the parents. All within their community, too.

It's always difficult to implement change, and the first step is invariably the hardest. If we were to leave aside the issue of the size of pensions for a moment and think about how everyone in society could apply themselves with dignity, we would already have made life in our village or town or city or country that little bit better. What do I have in mind, you may be wondering? Well, nursing homes could call on the local elderly population to volunteer to come and read to their patients or simply to sit and talk to them. Kindergartens could give grandmothers the chance to monitor the children along with the teachers during play time, or grandfathers the opportunity to do some woodwork with them, or teach them English or Russian or German. Universities could invite emeritus professors to give seminars on all things tried and tested. We already call on young people to take up voluntary work, and yet older people have far more time on their hands. Not to mention the wisdom that comes with it.

My wish for the new year is that we reach out to the most experienced and most knowledgeable of Estonians – within them is a lot of untapped potential to build a better country. Because for all of us...

“Every day opens up new opportunities to discover the world...”*

Happy new year!

** 'We All Get Old' performed by Getter Jaani & Mihkel Raud / composed by Sven Lõhmus*