

From The Inside

by Joseph O'Day

“I’m surprised you applied, Joe. I thought you were happy where you are. People who work with me know I’m blunt. I tell it like it is. You’re no spring chicken.”

For the past eighteen years I’d been Director of Pharmacy at a community teaching hospital in Boston. I met Pete (not his real name), a thirty-something, about a year ago when he arrived from out of state. We see each other regularly at our pharmacy directors’ meetings.

His comment shocks me. I react by laughing.

“I may be no spring chicken, but I have a ton of experience and I’m a hard worker and an excellent problem solver.” This is a first interview with Pete, pharmacy director of a large academic medical center. I’m applying for the associate director’s position, a step down in title for me but a step up in scope of responsibility.

“And I *work young*,” I tell him, adapting a phrase I’d heard about a diminutive high-school basketball star who “*plays big*.”

I’m uncomfortable defending my age, trying to convince him I’m not a typical “oldy.” I feel like a sell-out—separating myself from a group, in essence saying, “I may look like them, but I’m really different.” As if being like them is shameful.

“I don’t want to hire somebody who’ll be gone in a couple of years,” Pete says. “Do you even understand the job’s enormous responsibility?”

I want to shout, “Of *course* I understand the job’s responsibility. I’ve been in pharmacy for more than thirty-five years—progressing from intern to pharmacist to supervisor to assistant director to director, at large and small, teaching and non-teaching hospitals.”

I respond politely: “I have no intention of leaving in a few years.”

“Glad to hear,” he says.

Pete's ruled me out. Not for lack of skills. How would he even know? He's asked nothing of my background. If I continue with the interview process, perhaps I could change his mind. But experience has taught me the importance of having a supportive, caring boss, especially in a high stress position like this. He's not that kind of boss, I decide. I don't want to work for him. A few days later I withdraw. "It's not in the cards," I say.

"Thanks for your interest," he replies.

I'm angry. His mention of age was so contrary to what I've learned about non-discriminatory hiring practices.

I thought back to a remark he'd made at a directors' meeting. Noticing my sweater, he smirked and said, "You old guys are always cold." The comment struck me as funny but odd. When I returned to my hospital later that morning, I told a colleague, a few years my senior. She gasped, saying he sounded ageist.

I'd always taken such comments lightly, probably because I never felt old—even when I complained about my body's stiffness, or kidded with my barber about darkening my hair, or heard the crackling of my knees when descending stairs. When my sub seven-minute mile road races regressed to sub eleven-minute mile races, I lamented my slowing pace but knew it didn't translate to a less efficiently run hospital pharmacy service.

I pondered the dissonance between what I verbalized about aging and what I believed. Despite stiffness, crackling knees, and slower strides, I essentially looked at life as if I were a thirty-year-old. I still got the high of exercise—the pump in my triceps and lats, the tightening in my abdominals, the lightness in my strides. When I fell out of shape I'd think, *If I didn't have to spend so much time at work, if I could put together a consistent string of workouts, I'd be my strong, supple self.*

I just turned sixty, didn't feel old, and never felt discriminated against. Until that interview.

I started wondering how my own staff viewed me. Many were in their twenties and thirties. Did they see someone nearing the end of a career, having out-of-date, old-fashioned ways? If I had difficulty learning our new computer system, or trouble coming

up with a word, or had a short attention span, did they think it was due to my age or just a trait of my personality?

Shortly after withdrawing my application, I interviewed a pharmacist for a position at my hospital. I asked him about his professional goals.

“Unlike you,” he said, “I have many years and career options left.”

“Hey, my career isn’t over,” I said.

“I just mean... You know what I mean. Unlike you, I have at least twenty years left.” His facial expression asked, “Isn’t it obvious, man?”

I thought about older colleagues from my past. Lenny, a pharmacist in his sixties, whom I’d hired despite spending the bulk of his career in drug stores. He had no hospital experience, but through his unmatched enthusiasm and dedication, he became our lead chemotherapy pharmacist. I remember him once telling me he felt the same as he did in college. During the 1980s, an era of complex chemo regimens, he tirelessly and peerlessly served our most ill patients with safe, effective, intravenous chemotherapy mixtures.

Another pharmacist, Harold, in his mid-sixties, worked for me during a turbulent time in our hospital’s history, a period of high personnel turnover rates and endlessly overflowing patient censuses. Harold worked his regular evening shifts and took on extra days and weekends and added duties, without complaint, at times singlehandedly keeping the pharmacy running safely. He outworked everyone. The only criticism I ever heard was that he kept his head down and was always busy.

I recalled something New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady, in his late thirties, once said. “I think for me, I always feel like I’m the same guy. I feel like I’m still the kid from Portola Drive. I know probably from the outside in it’s different, but from the inside out, it’s the same.”

That’s the way I felt. From the inside, I was still that young, vigorous guy, fighting the good fight for our patients.

I considered prejudice, and how it can live underground, behind humor, behind consciousness. Had I ever unknowingly discriminated, leaving someone feeling as powerless and diminished as I’d felt during that interview with Pete? Had I ever judged

another by age? Or appearance, or hair color, or clothes, or accent, or manner, or size? Rather than by what's inside, by what value they might bring to the workplace?

I thought about the meanings of words like young and old, optimism and pessimism, enthusiasm and apathy, hopefulness, despair. Young people, especially the very young (like my two-year-old granddaughter), are so excited by life and discovery, the endless opportunities offered in the world. They're full of possibility: optimism, enthusiasm, hopefulness. I've seen those same traits in elderly people too—my parents and my wife's parents, my colleagues. These traits aren't only for the young or to be found in the young. They're a pathway of being, regardless of age.



Joseph O'Day's writing focuses on family relationships and life transitions. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Spry Literary Journal*, *The Critical Flame: A Journal of Literature and Culture*, *bioStories*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *Molecule: A Tiny Lit Mag*, *The Salem News*, *The American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy*, and *Focus on Faulkner*. He received his MA in English (Creative Writing) from Salem State University and served as Nonfiction Editor of *Soundings East*, Salem State's literary journal. He was the Director of Pharmacy at Brigham and Woman's Faulkner Hospital for many years until his retirement.