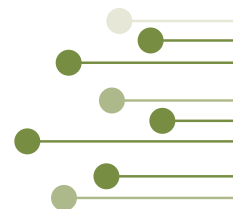


Does Old Age Have Meaning?



The Meaning of Age

Most of the characteristic qualities we associate with old age are uniquely human. For instance, among animal species in the wild, we never see offspring take care of the aging parents who gave birth to them. On the contrary, young animals typically leave their parents when they themselves reach maturity, like baby birds that leave the nest to fly on their own. It is only human beings who care for and honor the oldest members of the species, just as only human beings care for and remember their dead. In both cases, we might ask: Why?

The answer is that human beings live in a symbolic world of shared meaning, and the power of meaning can be a matter of life and death. For example, acts of bravery in crisis or wartime prove that people are willing to sacrifice their lives for what outlives the individual self—whether they act on behalf of family, religion, patriotism, or something else. Outliving the self—what Erik Erikson called *generativity*—is not limited to acts of sacrifice (Kotre, 1984). Awareness of a meaning that transcends individual life is a universal human quality. Transcendence and the search for meaning are what make us human (Frankl, 2006).

Human beings contemplate aging and death, and they reach backward and forward in time to pose questions about the meaning of existence. In remembering the dead and in caring for the aged, we express our deepest convictions about the meaning of life. Old age is a time when we are likely to come face-to-face with questions about the ultimate meaning of being human. While there have always been some members of any given population that are the oldest, it was only in the 20th century that a sizable proportion of the population survived to experience old age. It is therefore natural that, in our time, the meaning of old age has become an issue.

The question about whether old age has meaning is both a personal question and a challenge for gerontology. The personal question is ultimately a matter of values: What is it that makes my life worth living into the last stage? Put this way, it may seem like an abstract or philosophical question. But as we see in discussions about end-of-life decisions, this question becomes practical for families, health professionals, and, in truth, everyone.

Whether old age has meaning is central to what we understand to be life satisfaction or morale in old age (Ardelt & Edwards, 2015; Kaufman, 1986). If aging threatens deeply held values—such as the desire to be independent, to have

control, or to be socially esteemed—then both society and individuals will seek to avoid aging or deny it as much as possible. Aging and dying are not the same thing, of course, but they are strongly associated in the minds of many. The denial of aging and the denial of death are central problems for our society (Becker, 1973; Schillace, 2015).

Thus, there are at least three questions we need to examine: Does old age have a meaning for society? How do individuals actually experience their lives as meaningful in the last stage of life? And, for you, the reader of this book, how do you imagine your future older self, and what do you imagine will be meaningful to you? These questions are related, and all pose a challenge to gerontology. A key issue is whether we have a theory of aging that can explain the facts about old age, including the different meanings old age takes on over the course of life and through history. To focus on these questions about meaning and aging, we can begin with two domains—leisure and religion—that express contrasting values of activity and disengagement and thereby offer alternative perspectives on how people find meaning in later life.

Leisure Activities in Later Life

Old age is characteristically a time when the work role becomes less constricting. Leisure may take its place as a way of finding meaning in life. We might think of leisure simply as discretionary time, which becomes more available during the retirement years. But more deeply, leisure can be defined as activity engaged in for its own sake, as an end in itself. Leisure is not simply what we do with “left-over” time, but a multidimensional quality of life different from paid employment, household maintenance, or other instrumental activities. Aristotle described leisure as a realm in which human beings gain freedom for self-development when the necessities of life have been taken care of.

Does leisure actually replace the work role in later life? Does it become a powerful source of meaning in its own right? The answer to these questions depends on the quality of subjective experience during leisure. Leisure may be an end in itself, but moments of leisure also have a developmental structure; they are not complete in themselves. For example, if we play sports, perform music, participate in political or civic activities, or read a book, each moment leads to the next in some purposeful developmental pattern. By contrast, other common leisure activities, such as TV viewing, take up a lot of time for older people, but tend to be passive or less demanding. If leisure activity is to be a path to deeper meaning, then it must have some dimension of growth or personal development (McGuire, Boyd, & Tedrick, 2004; Bielak, 2017).

As people get older, they usually engage in the same activities as earlier in life, but with advancing age, there tends to be an overall decline in the level of participation. It is a mistake to think in stereotypes about “old people’s” activities, such as shuffleboard, bingo, and singing old-time songs. That stereotype is wrong because

age alone does not serve as a good predictor of what people do with their leisure in later life. Old people are not all alike. Variations and individual differences, along with the influence of gender, cultural background, education level, socioeconomic status, and other factors, play a big part.

Changing Leisure Participation Patterns

How do patterns of leisure activity change over the life course? Broadly speaking, people ages 65 and older continue to engage in the same activities with the same people as they did in middle age. Although there is some selective age-related withdrawal, active engagement remains a key to life satisfaction and positive meaning in later life. In addition, participation in intellectual and political leisure activities may have protective benefits for cognition during later life (Kareholt et al., 2010).

Social structures, not age itself, determine the uses of time in later life. According to surveys of time use, as people age, they spend varying proportions of time in paid work, family care, personal care, and free time. Most of the variation comes from a decrease in time spent working, not from any demonstrable effects of aging. People who are still in the labor force after age 65 have time use patterns similar to those of younger people. Retirement frees up time—findings from the 2018 American Time Use Survey indicate that people 75 years of age and older engage on average in 7.8 hours of leisure time daily, more than any other age group (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019a). After taking into account household labor, most of this gain in time is taken up by watching TV, reading, relaxing and thinking, and socializing. Some leisure activities decline with age, but others remain the same. A study of leisure found that the number of people starting new activities does diminish as we get older (Iso, Jackson, & Dunn, 1994). In addition, certain activities show a marked decline in participation rates: For example, moviegoing drops from 38% in midlife to 17% after age 65. Involvement in indoor fitness shows a decline, and



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Leisure is not simply what we do with “leftover” time, but a multidimensional quality of life.

travel diminishes significantly among people over age 75. Other activities, such as outdoor gardening, show only modest declines, and still others, such as TV viewing, watching sports, and engaging in informal discussion, show no age-related decline at all. Church participation and community activities tend to be maintained. Age-related declines appear to come partly from barriers to physical exertion or access. Activities based in the home, such as reading or socializing with familiar people, remain strong until well into advanced old age. However, we must keep in mind that subgroups among older adults display markedly different patterns. For instance, the young-old can generally be categorized as the active-old, a group of increasing interest to advertisers and marketers (Furlong, 2007). Also, there may be variations in the leisure time pursuits of older adults in different minority groups (for example, the rate of church participation).

Patterns of late-life leisure have important implications for the economy in an aging society. Americans over the age of 50 offer a huge and growing market for business. They command more than half of all discretionary income and account for 40% of consumer demand. Older consumers are quite heterogeneous, varying by family status, ethnicity, education, geography, and social class. As we will discuss in Controversy 12 on the new aging marketplace, the “gray market” is stratified by age. The young-old are much more likely to be interested in travel than the old-old. Old-age leisure is often advertised as a consumption good or a status symbol, but leisure is also a means of affirming one’s identity, a vital dimension of our phenomenological *life world* at a time when other roles may be lost. Leisure time activities, then, are an important part of our personal world of meaning and also part of a shared horizon of socioeconomic transactions that shape the meaning of leisure over the entire life course.

Explaining Patterns of Leisure

A study of activity patterns in old age sheds interesting light on different theories of aging, such as activity theory, disengagement theory, and continuity theory (Toepoel, 2013). The Canadian Longitudinal Study of Aging found that most Ontario residents ages 45 to 85 engage in familiar activities and maintain stable activity patterns, as continuity theory would predict (Singleton, Forbes, & Agwani, 1993). However, the Canadian study also found that education and income are big factors. Retired people who have more choices because they have more resources are also likely to change their patterns of activity more often.

We also find some support for the idea of disengagement as people age, but not as a global generalization or stereotype. Disengagement, in other words, is not a universal pattern, but is highly selective, an example of selective optimization with compensation (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). As long as leisure activities remain accessible, people will go on doing what they find worthwhile and meaningful as long as they can. When physical impairments impose obstacles, most people adapt to optimize whatever resources they still have. Most people do not simply disengage altogether from meaningful activities.

Other explanations for the decline in leisure participation can also be found. For a segment of the older population with limited income, travel or cultural activities may be economically out of reach, perhaps an example of how social inequality accumulates over the life course and affects outcomes in later life (Ferraro & Shippee, 2009). But those with limited income may pursue activities outside the marketplace, for example, informal socializing with others. Another cause for constricted activity is declining health or age-related decline in vision, which might limit participation in fitness or sporting activities as well as driving. Even among those who remain healthy, loss of companions for leisure activities can be a limiting factor. As a result, decline in leisure, as we might expect, is most severe among the oldest-old.

In conclusion, it is important to note here that recent Pew Research Center data suggest that older adults spend, on average, half of their waking hours alone, not including time spent on personal care (Livingston, 2019). As such, participation in leisure activities may be an important buffer between older adults and loneliness and isolation.

Religion and Spirituality

According to recently published Gallup data, 72% of U.S. adults consider religion to be important in their lives; 50% are affiliated with a church, mosque, or synagogue; and 38% attend services weekly (Brenan, 2018b; Jones, 2019). It is worth noting that each of these figures has shown a declining trend over the past two decades, consistent with findings from the Pew Research Center that Americans are becoming less religious. Interestingly, 90% of older adults surveyed for the 2012 Pew Research Center's Religion and Public Life Project indicated that they are "religiously affiliated." For comparison, 67% of adults ages 18 to 29 report being "religiously affiliated," perhaps an example of a cohort difference. On the one hand, it seems natural to expect that interest in religion might increase with advancing age given the association of old age with increased mortality. On the other hand, the continuity theory of aging reminds us that, as people age, they tend to maintain earlier patterns of practice and belief.

But religion is more complicated than responses to a poll or attending a worship service might indicate. To understand the role of religion, we need to distinguish formal religious behavior from subjective attitudes toward religion, what we might call an inner attitude of spirituality. Across many different dimensions, religion and spirituality continue to play vital roles in the lives of older adults and help them find meaning in later life (Atchley, 2009).

Religious Involvement Over the Life Course

Religious involvement in old age displays a pattern that some investigators have called *multidimensional disengagement*. What this means is that as people grow

older, they may withdraw from some activities, such as attending church, but at the same time show an increase in personal religious practice, such as Bible study or listening to religious TV and radio. The number of people who report praying “once a day” or “several times a day” increases steadily from age 55 to the highest levels among those over 75. By contrast, other empirical studies show declining frequency of church attendance after age 75, perhaps reflecting frailty and physical limitations among the old-old. Older people seem to disengage from some organized religious roles, but make up for this loss by intensifying their nonorganizational religious involvement—for example, personal prayer, meditation, and other forms of spiritual practice.

Self-reported data from Gallup (2015) about religious affiliation of adults of all ages reveal the following: 38% identify as Protestant, 23% as Catholic, 9% as “unaffiliated” Christian, and 2% as Jewish. A smaller but increasing number of people living in the United States identify as Muslim. In 2017, Muslims of all ages made up 1.1% of the U.S. population. This represents 3.4 million people, 2.15 million of whom were adults (Mohamed, 2018). Interestingly, the same survey shows that the percentage of religiously “unaffiliated” persons is increasing. This compares to long-standing data suggesting that as they grow older, Americans continue to display patterns of religious identification similar to those among younger age groups: 65% identify as Protestant, 25% as Catholic, and 3% as Jewish (Pew Research Center, 2012a). In terms of the percentage of adults in the United States identifying as Muslim, 4% are age 65 or older (Cox & Jones, 2017). According to ongoing Gallup surveys, older women tend to have higher levels of religious participation and belief than do older men. Although survey data vary, it seems that, overall, anywhere from 30% to 60% of all older adults attend religious services at least once a week, and attendance tends to be positively related to measures of personal adjustment. When we look at church attendance from a life course perspective, we see the influence of family structure. Parents with young children often get involved in church activities, but after middle age, attendance falls off.

Despite these variations, older people are still more likely to be involved with their church, synagogue, or mosque than with other kinds of community organizations. Among mainstream Protestant and Catholic churches, as well as Jewish synagogues, a large proportion of the congregation is over age 50. Adults ages 65 and older are twice as likely to attend religious services regularly as those under 30. But it is a mistake to assume that people simply become more religious as they get older. Today’s older generation appears to be more religious, but that effect may be due more to cohort or generational effects than to age. For instance, older adults may have gone to Sunday school or been involved in religious activities throughout life. Such lifelong religious identification explains higher religiosity in old age. Recent poll data suggest that these patterns may be changing over time as cohorts move through the life course and the boomers—people born between 1946 and 1964—enter into later life. For example, the percentage of religiously unaffiliated persons is increasing, and current young adults are more likely to be religiously unaffiliated than other cohorts were at the same age (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Houses of worship and religious organizations play many roles in the lives of older people: in formal religious programs, through pastoral care programs, and as sponsors or providers of social services. Older adults find fulfillment in a variety of church-sponsored volunteer activities, but ironically, organized religion has often emphasized services and activities for youth. Innovative programs—such as Bible classes geared to older people, intergenerational programs, and new volunteer roles—could change that picture in the future. Congregations represent a great, partly untapped resource for older people to find meaning, provided that religious groups recognize that later-life spirituality may take a different form than participation in the religion of youth or midlife (Atchley, 2009).

Religious Participation and Well-Being

Researchers have been interested in the benefits that religion and spirituality can have for older people. Cross-sectional studies have found a positive correlation between measures of well-being and religious beliefs among the old (MacKinlay & McFadden, 2004). Those with high levels of religious commitment also have higher levels of life satisfaction than those for whom religious commitment is not as important. This relationship holds true even when controlling for age, marital status, education, and perceived health status.

But the significance of these correlations may be less than meets the eye. How do we define or measure what “religiousness” actually means in people’s lives? Another difficulty is the partial confounding of religious involvement with measures of functional health status. Does religious engagement actually promote physical health (George et al., 2013)?

Empirical studies have shown that religion can serve as a means of helping older people cope with stress. For example, the Duke Longitudinal Studies of Aging found that older persons who used religion as a coping mechanism were more likely to exhibit higher levels of adjustment than others, even during intense life stress, such as bereavement and chronic illness. Nearly half of the respondents in the Duke studies reported that religious attitudes or behavior helped them cope with stressful life events. Among those who relied on religion, coping strategies reflect different patterns of disengagement or activity. Private religious beliefs and behaviors, such as trust, faith in God, and prayer, were cited as coping strategies more frequently than church-related and religious social activities.



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Participation in religious activities and spiritual practices has been connected to well-being in later life.

Investigators theorize that religion helps older adults cope in a variety of ways:

- By reducing the impact of stress in late-life illness
- By providing a sense of order and meaning in life
- By offering social networks tied to religious groups
- By strengthening inner psychological resources, such as self-esteem

Urban Legends of Aging

“Religion is good for your health.”

It's true that people who attend church tend to live longer, but no one knows why. Some studies suggest that volunteerism, the arts, lifelong learning, or even having a pet will give the same

result. It could be that religion has little to do with it; maybe bowling would do the same (but not bowling alone). Here, as so often, correlation is not causation.

Spirituality and the Search for Meaning

Habits of religiosity, like other behaviors, tend to remain stable as people move into later life, but faith can take on new meanings as we grow older. One research team found that, among those who had undergone some distinct change in religious faith, 40% reported experiencing such a change after the age of 50. The researchers concluded that changes in religious faith are not limited to youth but can occur at any time in the life course (Koenig, 1994).

Often the personal search for meaning leads to deeper understanding of religious faith. James Fowler (1981) developed a framework of *faith stages* describing how people move from simpler, more literalist ideas of religion to levels where they see themselves and their lives in more universal terms, as the greatest saints and mystics have preached. As examples of those who have reached the highest stage of faith, Fowler cites personalities like Dag Hammarskjöld, Abraham Heschel, Thomas Merton, and Mahatma Gandhi.

Theologians who have reflected on the life course tend to view aging not as a problem that calls for a solution but as an existential condition that can provide an opportunity for personal growth, or what some have called a *spiritual journey* (Bianchi, 2011) that can lead to a contemplative dimension for aging (Tornstam, 1997). In terms of Erik Erikson's developmental theory, older adults struggle with a psychological conflict between ego integrity and despair. Faith can be a way of

enhancing ego integrity—an attitude of acceptance toward life and the world that is part of positive mental health. Stressing the importance of religion for mental health, Blazer (1991) has identified six dimensions of **spiritual well-being**: self-determined wisdom, self-transcendence, the discovery of meaning in aging, acceptance of the totality of life, revival of spirituality, and preparation for death. None of these tasks is easy, but the fact that some older people undertake this spiritual journey makes us believe that the effort can yield a profound sense of meaning for the later years (Noronha, 2015).

Global Perspective

The Search for Meaning in Asian Religions

The great civilizations of India, China, and Japan have all paid attention to the search for meaning in later life. Images of positive aging are embodied in these traditional religions of Asia.

Hindu Stages of Life

According to traditional Hinduism, spiritual freedom is the ultimate goal of life, to be attained by introspection and meditation. Aging as part of the total life course was understood to be crucial in ancient Hindu culture, which divided life into four major stages (*ashramas*). The first stage is discipleship, or learning from a guru. The second stage is the householder, based on marriage and family. The third stage is becoming a forest dweller, devoted to study of scripture. The fourth stage is complete renunciation, becoming a *sannyasi*, which may include teaching others as part of the path of transcendence.

Religion in China

According to Chinese Confucianism, filial piety is the primary virtue, including a duty to keep our body healthy to fulfill the demands of justice. We should feel gratitude toward elders and toward all

of nature. The other traditional Chinese religion was Taoism, which emphasized health promotion even more. Taoists have even believed that immortality could be possible if only human beings followed the true laws of nature. Taoism, in this way, joins forces with traditional Chinese medicine and its emphasis on attaining a proper balance among the various elements and energies in the human body.

Japanese Ikigai

The Japanese word *ikigai* can be translated as “source of value in one’s life” or “what makes life worth living.” *Ikigai* can have a range of meanings, extended from devotion to one’s children up to wider needs for fulfillment, such as personal growth, freedom, and self-actualization. In this respect, the concept of *ikigai* is similar to what contemporary psychologist Abraham Maslow called a “hierarchy of needs.” The ideal of *ikigai* has not been relegated to traditional virtues. This ideal has now been adopted by Japan’s Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in its national health promotion plan encouraging people to remain active beyond age 80.

Sources: Fukui (1988), Nakanishi (1999), Park (2015), Tilak (1989).

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Gerontology and the Meaning of Age

As a branch of the human sciences, gerontology tries to depict the facts about old age as a way of understanding the meaning of aging. But the approach of gerontology sometimes looks at meaning from the outside. Perhaps a better place to begin is to ask: What do older people themselves say about what gives meaning to their lives? When a sample of participants at a senior center was asked that question, nearly 90% of respondents described their lives as meaningful (Burbank, 1992). For most of them, the meaning came from human relationships, followed by service to others, religion, and leisure activities. Another study revealed that the most damaging threat to well-being in later life is loss of life purpose and boredom, not fear of absolute destitution or poor health. Responses show that people find purpose or meaning in a variety of ways: work, leisure, friendship, lifelong learning, grandparenting, and intimate adult relationships. Respondents reported that, unless they were sick or depressed, they “didn’t feel old” (Thompson, 1993), which suggests what has been called “the ageless self” (Baars, 2012; Kaufman, 1986).

Looking at verbal responses or patterns of behavior is suggestive but may not get us any closer to understanding meaning in the last stage of life. Questionnaires about life satisfaction tell us only a limited amount about these deeper issues (Windle & Woods, 2004). Inevitably, values and philosophical assumptions reveal themselves in our discourse.

According to one widely shared view, the agenda for gerontology should be to promote better social integration of the aged (Rosow, 1967) by means of group activities, social involvement, and participatory roles of all kinds. We see that view in the popularity of *productive aging*, intergenerational programs, and other strategies. The ideal of an “age-integrated society” is a comprehensive enunciation of the same goal (Riley & Riley, 1994). Whether through work, leisure, or attendance at religious services, the aim of social integration is for people to stay engaged throughout life. Workers in senior centers and nursing homes often share this outlook. But if we view role losses of old age as an opportunity for self-development beyond conventional roles, then integration in group activities may no longer seem so compelling. Other values, sources of meaning, and uses of what time one has left might assume greater importance.

We might still encourage older people to maintain social connections or affiliate with groups, but the form of that engagement would be based on a strategy for individual development, not conformity to social norms or activities. An example of such individual development might be a creative arts program designed to encourage self-expression; another example might be a religious retreat designed to support individual prayer and meditation. These last kinds of pursuits seem in keeping with the potential for interiority and individuation in later life. Whether individual contemplation or social activity is the more desirable approach still remains debatable, of course, but that is precisely what is at issue in the controversy about whether old age has meaning or offers some special opportunity not readily available at other stages of life. The question is what makes it important

for gerontology to look more deeply at what inspires a shared sense of meaning in life's last stage (Cole & Gadow, 1986).

The Meaning of Aging in the 21st Century

The life course perspective views stages of life as social constructions reflecting broader structural conditions of society. As conditions change, so will our view of how people find meaning at different stages of life. Consider the weakening of age norms and beliefs about what is “appropriate” for different stages of life. In a world where retired people may go back to college or where a woman may have her first child at age 40, it makes less sense to link education or work with strict chronological ages. Indeed, one attractive strategy for an aging society might well be to introduce more flexibility for people of all ages to pursue education, work, and leisure over the entire course of life, rather than link these activities normatively to periods of youth, middle life, and old age, as modern societies have done in the past.

It is not clear how the meaning of old age will change in contemporary postindustrial societies. On the one hand, older Americans have achieved gains in income levels, health, and political power. On the other hand, as the stages of life have evolved and become blurred, the entire image of old age is giving way to more of an “age-irrelevant” image of the life course (Neugarten, 1983). As an empirical matter, chronological age, by itself, loses predictive value and importance for many purposes. However, given that age discrimination is far from eradicated, it seems that age—and aging—continues to be quite relevant.

Does this trend mean that old age, as a distinct stage of life, no longer has any special meaning or significance? Here, we again must distinguish between a meaning that society ascribes to old age and what individuals find meaningful in their own lives. In postmodern culture, it is increasingly difficult to ascribe anything special to the last stage of life. But if nothing special is to be found in later life, we wonder, does it follow that personal meaning in old age must simply be “more of the same,” that is, continuing whatever values gave meaning earlier in life? Is old age becoming but an extension to or the tale-end of midlife? Or does lifelong growth

Thinking Critically: Meaning in Later Life

What gives your life purpose and meaning? Has your sense of purpose and meaning changed over time? Are there activities or pursuits that were important to you earlier in life that are no longer important to you? When you imagine your future

older self, are there sources of purpose and meaning that are important to you now that will continue to be important to you in the future? Do you imagine that you will discover new sources of purpose and meaning when you are an older person?

imply a constant effort to overcome old habits and change our view of what offers meaning in life—perhaps by composing a new version of our life story (Bateson, 2011)? These questions have no easy answers but are important to consider.

Activity or Reflection?

The previous discussion initially looked at two classical theories of aging—disengagement and activity. We saw how both theories implicitly appeal to deeply held values but point in opposite directions. When we think about the question of whether old age has meaning, we come back, over and over again, to two fundamental alternatives: on the one hand, continuation of midlife values into old age, and on the other hand, discovering some new or special challenge or purpose that belongs to the last stage of life.

In the following readings, we begin with a selection by Simone de Beauvoir that offers the view of a philosopher who rejects traditional ideals of old age as a time of tranquility or disengagement. On the contrary, she believes that only continued activity on behalf of new goals will give our lives meaning, whether in old age or at any other time of life. Along these lines, John Rowe and Robert Kahn's strategy of "successful aging" represents a way of preserving meaning by adapting ourselves to diminished reserve capacity. Rowe and Kahn believe that "success" is best defined by optimizing capacity for continued engagement with the activities of life.

Erik Erikson, writing with Joan Erikson and Helen Kivnick, shares this endorsement of engagement but takes a different approach. Erikson sees each stage of life as a period with its own purpose or psychological task to be achieved. Old age is different from other stages because it offers a kind of culmination to life as a whole. Erikson believes that, through concern for the welfare of future generations, older people find a sense of meaning in later life. In the personal journal of Florida Scott-Maxwell, we find an echo of Carl Jung's belief that advanced age is a time for turning inward for deeper reflection. Her rich reflections prove that even when outer activity is cut off, it is still possible to find deep meaning in the last stage of life (Berman, 1986).

Modernization has made it possible for people to live a greater portion of their lives in old age than ever before in history. At the same time, the distinctive stance of postmodern culture tends to preclude finding any special meaning or purpose for the last stage of life. Whether modernization has reduced the power of the old seems debatable. Public spending for old-age benefits suggests that just the opposite may be true. But there is no doubt that modernization has helped to erode traditional ideas about fixed stages of life that were once based on shared meaning (Gruman, 1978). The result is a sense of openness or uncertainty about the meaning of old age. Such openness to new ideas and to contradictory answers is disconcerting to some and exhilarating to others. However, the future of an aging society will be shaped by all of us because, in the end, the old are simply our future selves.

Focus on Practice

Reminiscence and Life Review

As people grow older, it is not unusual for them to reminisce about the “good old days.” Feelings of both nostalgia and regret are commonly part of this attitude toward the past. A stereotypical response to reminiscence is to assume that older people are interested only in the past or, still worse, to see those who dwell on past memories as showing signs of escapism or even mental impairment. But late-life reminiscence may be a normal form of **life review**, which Robert Butler (1963) defined as a natural, even universal process stimulated by awareness of approaching death. He also wrote:

The life review is characterized by a progressive return to consciousness of past experience, in particular the resurgence of unresolved conflicts which can now be surveyed and integrated. . . . If unresolved conflicts and fears are successfully reintegrated they can give new significance and meaning to an individual's life. (Butler, 1974, p. 534)

Butler's view is similar to that of Erik Erikson, who sees the psychological task of late life as achieving ego integrity, a reintegration of all aspects of the individual's life. Both Erikson and Butler based their psychological theories on the importance of finding meaning in the last stage of life. But do the facts support their theories? Just how important is reminiscence in old age?

Some studies have shown that older adults actually do not spend much more time daydreaming about the past than do people of other ages (Gambria, 1977), so it may be a mistake to see life review as a universal process. However, regardless of frequency,

reminiscence may have adaptive value; that is, it may promote better mental health in old age. One early study of reminiscence found that people who spend time thinking about the past are less likely to suffer depression (McMahon & Rhudick, 1967). Some psychologists who have studied life review feel it may be a psychological defense mechanism that helps some people adjust to memories of an unhappy past. In that sense, reminiscence could be described as an adaptive feature of old age (Coleman, 1974), which is something to be encouraged (Brennan & Steinberg, 1983–1984).

Reminiscence and life review appear to help some older people bolster their self-image. By recalling the past, older adults can improve self-esteem and establish solidarity with others of their own generation. We might interpret older people's interaction with the young as a way to help them maximize perceived power or status, just as the exchange theory of aging predicts. When activity is the preferred style, older people are likely to downplay reminiscence in favor of talking about present or future events. But when disengagement is the preferred style, older people may emphasize past accomplishments.

Some gerontologists recommend that reminiscence and life review can have great value for older people who can no longer remain active (Haight & Haight, 2007). For that reason, reminiscence groups have been encouraged as a form of therapy among some nursing home residents and senior center participants. Guided autobiography is a method used as a basis for education in the later years (Birren & Cochran, 2001). Spiritual autobiography groups have played a similar role in religious congregations.

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All these methods can be useful for practitioners who work with older people, but techniques to encourage reminiscence as a form of practice must not divert us from a basic question: Is reminiscence or life review the best way of achieving a sense of meaning in old age? The response to that question cannot be purely scientific, but depends on basic values and philosophy of life. For example, if we follow philosopher Simone de Beauvoir's view, then activity and future orientation are the best approaches to finding meaning in old age. She would therefore discourage people from spending time reminiscing about the past, unless past memories can somehow contribute to improving the world. Psychologist Carl Jung, in contrast, would see great value in inwardness or interiority in old age. The purpose or meaning of old age, in his view, is not necessarily to be active, but to know ourselves better and to accept ourselves as individuals (Sawin, Corbett, & Carbine, 2014). If life review can promote that goal, then Jung would encourage it, and Florida Scott-Maxwell, for example, follows along the lines suggested by Jung.

Do the reminiscence and life review by older people have meaning for people of other ages? Clearly, there is something special about old age precisely because it is the final stage of life. The last

stage includes an awareness of finitude and a shortened time perspective (Kastenbaum, 1983). Furthermore, as the pace of social change increases, older people can no longer take for granted that their values will be shared by other cohorts; the 1960s and World War II generations may be quite different, not only from one another but from Generation X, born during the baby bust after the mid-1960s. The old may be perceived by others or perceive themselves as belonging to "the past," regardless of their own subjective time orientation. Young people may assume that reminiscence is something appropriate only for the old.

In fact, the process of life review or autobiographical consciousness is not limited to old age, but occurs at transitions across the adult life course—for instance, in self-assessment after a job loss or another major life change. The life course perspective helps us appreciate links between subjective and objective time orientations and to see life review in broader terms. The search for meaning in life occurs not only at the end of life, but every time human beings become aware of their limited time on earth. It is perhaps for that reason that in the Bible the Psalms include a prayer for God to help us all "number our days" and thus cherish each passing moment, whatever our age may be.

Reading 1: The Coming of Age

Simone de Beauvoir

Die early or grow old: there is no other alternative. And yet, as Goethe said, “Age takes hold of us by surprise.” For himself each man is the sole, unique subject, and we are often astonished when the common fate becomes our own—when we are struck by sickness, a shattered relationship, or bereavement. I remember my own stupefaction when I was seriously ill for the first time in my life and I said to myself, “This woman they are carrying on a stretcher is me.” Nevertheless, we accept fortuitous accidents readily enough, making them part of our history, because they affect us as unique beings: but old age is the general fate, and when it seizes upon our own personal life we are dumbfounded. “Why, what has happened?” writes Aragon. “It is life that has happened, and I am old.” . . . When we are grown up we hardly think about our age anymore: we feel that the notion does not apply to us; for it is one which assumes that we look back towards the past and draw a line under the total, whereas in fact we are reaching out towards the future, gliding on imperceptibly from day to day, from year to year. Old age is particularly difficult to assume because we have always regarded it as something alien, a foreign species: “Can I have become a different being while I still remain myself?” . . .

Thus, the very quality of the future changes between middle age and the end of one’s life. At sixty-five one is not merely twenty years older than one was at forty-five. One has exchanged an indefinite future—and one had a tendency to look upon it as infinite—for a finite future. In earlier days, we could see no boundary mark upon the horizon: now we do see one. “When I used to dream in former times,” says Chateaubriand, harking back to his remote past, “my youth lay before me; I could

advance towards the unknown that I was looking for. Now I can no longer take a single step without coming up against the boundary-stone.” . . .

A limited future and a frozen past: such is the situation that the elderly have to face up to. In many instances, it paralyzes them. All their plans have either been carried out or abandoned, and their life has closed in about itself; nothing requires their presence; they no longer have anything whatsoever to do. . . .

Clearly, there is one preconceived notion that must be totally set aside—the idea that old age brings serenity. From classical times, the adult world has done its best to see mankind’s condition in a hopeful light; it has attributed to ages that are not its own, virtues that they do not possess: innocence to childhood, serenity to old age. It has deliberately chosen to look upon the end of life as a time when all the conflicts that tear it apart are resolved. What is more, this is a convenient illusion: it allows one to suppose, in spite of all the ills and misfortunes that are known to overwhelm them, that the old are happy and that they can be left to their fate. . . .

Why should an old person be better than the adult or child he was? It is quite hard enough to remain a human being when everything—health, memory, possessions, standing, and authority—has been taken from you. The old person’s struggle to do so has pitiable or ludicrous sides to it, and his fads, his meanness, and his deceitful ways may irritate one or make one smile; but in reality it is a very moving struggle. It is the refusal to sink below the human level, a refusal to become the insect, the inert object to which the adult world wishes to reduce the aged. There is something heroic in desiring to

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preserve a minimum of dignity in the midst of such total deprivation. . . .

On the intellectual plane, old age may also bring liberation: it sets one free from false notions. The clarity of mind that comes with it is accompanied by an often bitter disillusionment. In childhood and youth, life is experienced as a continual rise; and in favourable cases—either because of professional advancement or because bringing up one's children is a source of happiness, or because one's standard of living rises, or because of a greater wealth of knowledge—the notion of upward progress may persist in middle age. Then all at once a man discovers that he is no longer going anywhere, that his path leads him only to the grave. He has climbed to a peak, and from a peak there can be a fall. "Life is a long preparation for something that never happens," said Yeats. There comes a moment when one knows that one is no longer getting ready for anything and one understands that the idea of advancing towards a goal was a delusion. Our personal history had assumed that it possessed an end, and now it finds, beyond any sort of doubt, that this finality has been taken from it. At the same time, its character of a "useless passion" becomes evident. A discovery of this kind, says Schopenhauer, strips us of our will to live. "Nothing left of those illusions that gave life its charm and that spurred on our activity. It is only at the age of sixty that one thoroughly understands the first verse of Ecclesiastes." . . .

If *all* were vanity or deceit, there would indeed be nothing left but to wait for death. But admitting that life does not contain its own end does not mean that it is incapable of devoting itself to ends of some kind. There are pursuits that are useful to mankind, and between men there are relationships in which they reach one another in full truthfulness. Once illusions have been swept away, these relationships, in which neither alienation nor myth form any part, and these pursuits remain. We may go on hoping to communicate with others by writing

even when childish images of fame have vanished. By a curious paradox, it is often at the very moment that the aged man, having become old, has doubts about the value of his entire work that he carries it to its highest point of perfection. This was so with Rembrandt, Michelangelo, Verdi, and Monet. It may be that these doubts themselves help to enrich it. And then again it is often a question of coincidence: Age brings technical mastery and freedom while at the same time it also brings a questioning, challenging state of mind. . . .

Freedom and clarity of mind are not of much use if no goal beckons us anymore; but they are of great value if one is still full of projects. The greatest good fortune, even greater than health, for the old person is to have his world still inhabited by projects: then, busy and useful, he escapes from both boredom and decay. The times in which he lives remain his own, and he is not compelled to adopt the defensive or aggressive forms of behavior that are so often characteristic of the final years. . . .

There is only one solution if old age is not to be an absurd parody of our former life, and that is to go on pursuing ends that give our existence a meaning—devotion to individuals, to groups, or to causes—social, political, intellectual, or creative work. In spite of the moralists' opinion to the contrary, in old age, we should wish still to have passions strong enough to prevent us from turning in upon ourselves. One's life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation, compassion. When this is so, then there are still valid reasons for activity or speech. People are often advised to "prepare" for old age. But if this merely applies to setting aside money, choosing the place for retirement, and laying on hobbies, we shall not be much the better for it when the day comes. It is far better not to think about it too much, but to live a fairly committed, fairly justified life so that one may go on in the same path even when all illusions have vanished and one's zeal for life has died away.

Reading 2: Successful Aging

John Rowe and Robert Kahn

Satchel Paige, baseball's legendary, indestructible African-American pitcher, was as famous for his fast answers as for his fastball. He began pitching at the age of seventeen and was for many years restricted to what was then called the Negro Baseball League. Born near the turn of the century, he was already a veteran at the pitcher's mound when the racial barrier was relaxed. However, the decades rolled by, and he continued to pitch. As he did so, Paige became purposefully vague about his age, a subject of increasing speculation among sportswriters. When one of them put the question bluntly—"How old *are* you?"—Paige gave him a classic answer: "How old would *you* be if you didn't know how old you was?" The question—and Paige's answer—have as much to do with society's definitions and expectations of aging, and successful aging, as with Paige's own personal experience. By physical measures, at least, Paige was certainly aging successfully. But his wariness about coming clean with a hard number speaks volumes about our society's skepticism about competence in old age. What, after all, does it mean to "age successfully"? Does America think of aging *per se* as a bad thing, even when good things continue to develop—or emerge for the first time—with age? What, actually, is "success"?

Successful Aging or the Imitation of Youth?

Modern society, perhaps especially American society, seems to regard aging as something to be denied or concealed. Women are freed, happily, from the corsets and similar instruments of torture that fashion once decreed. But a massive and inventive cosmetics industry does its best to persuade middle-aged and

elderly women—and, increasingly, men—that they will lead happier lives if they change their hair color from gray to some improbable shade of blonde or red, camouflage their hair loss, and cover, erase, or abrade their wrinkles.

Photographs that advertise the products in question show people who are invariably young in appearance; photographer and makeup artist collaborate to send the incessant message of youth. And what cosmetics and computer-enhanced photography cannot do, plastic surgery offers to accomplish. The implication of all this information and misinformation is that the ultimate form of successful aging would be no aging at all. A psychologist might be tempted to say that underlying this denial of the aging process is a more deep-seated denial: refusal to acknowledge the fact of human mortality and the inevitability of death.

Our view of successful aging is not built on the search for immortality and the fountain of youth. George Bernard Shaw, when he was in his nineties, was asked whether he had any advice for younger people. He did. "Do not try to live forever," said Shaw, "you will not succeed." Or, as psychologist Carol Ryff put it in a thoughtful article, "Ponce de León missed the point."

In short, successful aging means just what it says—aging well, which is very different from not aging at all. The three main components of successful aging—avoiding disease and disability, maintaining mental and physical function, and continuing engagement with life—are important throughout life, but their realization in old age differs from that at earlier life stages.

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Old age has been called a “roleless role,” a time when it is no longer clear what is expected of the elderly person or where he or she can find the resources that will make old age successful.

For earlier life stages, the expectations are clearer. Children are expected to attend school; in fact, they are legally required to do so. Able-bodied adults are expected to be employed or to be actively seeking paid employment. Parents of young children are expected to care for them. None of these societal expectations generates perfect compliance, but all of them are felt and most of them are backed by law.

The years after child-rearing and employment present a sharp contrast to these expectational patterns and arrangements for their fulfillment. Almost nothing is expected of the elderly. The spoken advice from youth to age is “take it easy,” which means do nothing or amuse yourself. The unspoken message is “find your own way and keep out of ours.”

Many older men and women do better than that. . . . They find new friends, partially replace paid employment with useful voluntary activity, maintain some form of regular exercise, and enjoy a measure of increased leisure. But many others do much less and age less well.

Reading 3: Vital Involvement in Old Age

Erik H. Erikson, Joan M. Erikson, and Helen Q. Kivnick

Elders have both less and more. Unlike the infant, the elder has a reservoir of strength in the well-springs of history and storytelling. As collectors of time and preservers of memory, those healthy elders who have survived into a reasonably fit old age have time on their side—time that is to be dispensed wisely and creatively, usually in the form of stories, to those younger ones who will one day follow in their footsteps. Telling these stories, and telling them well, marks a certain capacity for one generation to entrust itself to the next, by passing on a certain shared and collective identity to the survivors of the next generation: the future. Trust . . . is one of the constant human values or virtues, universally acknowledged as basic for all relationships. Hope is yet another basic foundation for all community living and for survival itself, from infancy to old age. The question of old age, and perhaps of life, is how—with the trust and competency accumulated

in old age—one adapts to and makes peace with the inevitable physical disintegration of aging.

After years of collaboration, elders should be able to know and trust, and know when to mistrust, not only their own senses and physical capacities, but also their accumulated knowledge of the world around them. It is important to listen to the authoritative and objective voices of professionals with an open mind, but one’s own judgment, after all those years of intimate relations with the body and with others, is decisive. The ultimate capacities of the aging person are not yet determined. The future may well bring surprises.

Elders, of course, know well their own strengths. They should keep all of these strengths in use and involved in whatever their environment offers or makes possible. And they should not underestimate the possibility of developing strengths that are still dormant. Taking part in needed and useful work is

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appropriate for both elders and their relationship to the community.

With aging, there are inevitably constant losses—losses of those very close, and friends near and far. Those who have been rich in intimacy also have the most to lose. Recollection is one form of adaptation, but the effort skillfully to form new relationships is adaptive and more rewarding. Old age is necessarily a time of relinquishing—of giving up old friends, old roles, earlier work that was once meaningful, and even possessions that belong to a previous stage of life and are now an impediment to the resiliency and freedom that seem to be requisite for adapting to the unknown challenges that determine the final stage of life.

Trust in interdependence. Give and accept help when it is needed. Old Oedipus well knew that the aged sometimes need three legs; pride can be an asset but not a cane.

When frailty takes over, dependence is appropriate, and one has no choice but to trust in the compassion of others and be consistently surprised at how faithful some caretakers can be.

Much living, however, can teach us only how little is known. Accept that essential “notknowingness” of childhood and with it also that playful curiosity. Growing old can be an interesting adventure and is certainly full of surprises.

One is reminded here of the image Hindu philosophy uses to describe the final letting go—that of merely being. The mother cat picks up in her mouth the kitten, which completely collapses every tension and hangs limp and infinitely trusting in the maternal benevolence. The kitten responds instinctively. We human beings require at least a whole lifetime of practice to do this. The religious traditions of the world reflect these concerns and provide them with substance and form.

The Potential Role of Elders in Our Society

Our society confronts the challenge of drawing a large population of healthy elders into the social order in a way that productively uses their

capacities. Our task will be to envision what influences such a large contingent of elders will have on our society as healthy old people seek and even demand more vital involvement. Some attributes of the accrued wisdom of old age are fairly generally acknowledged and respected. If recognized and given scope for expression, they could have an important impact on our social order. We suggest the following possibilities.

Older people are, by nature, conservationists. Long memories and wider perspectives lend urgency to the maintenance of our natural world. Old people, quite understandably, seem to feel more keenly the obstruction of open waterfronts, the cutting of age-old stands of trees, the paving of vast stretches of fertile countryside, and the pollution of once clear streams and lakes. Their longer memories recall the beauty of their surroundings in earlier years. We need those memories and those voices.

With aging, men and women in many ways become less differentiated in their masculine and feminine predilections. This in no way suggests a loss of sexual drive and interest between the sexes. Men, it seems, become more capable of accepting the interdependence that women have more easily practiced. Many elder women today, in their turn, become more vigorously active and involved in those affairs that have been the dominant province of men. Some women come to these new roles by virtue of their propensity to outlive the men who have been their partners. Many younger women have made a similar transition by becoming professional members of the workforce. These women seem capable of managing parenting and householding along with their jobs, particularly if they have partners who learn cooperation in these matters as an essential component of the marriage contract.

Our subjects demonstrate a tolerance and capacity for weighing more than one side of a question that is an attribute of the possible wisdom of aging. They should be well suited to serve as arbiters in a great variety of disputes. Much experience should be a precursor of long-range vision and clear judgment.

The aged have had a good deal of experience as societal witnesses to the effects of devastation and aggression. They have lived through wars and seen the disintegration of peace settlements. They know that violence breeds hatred and destroys the interconnectedness of life here on our earth and that now our capacity for destruction is such that violence is no longer a viable solution for human conflict.

Ideally, elders in any given modern society should be those who, having developed a marked degree of tolerance and appreciation for otherness, which includes “foreigners” and “foreign ways,” might become advocates of a new international understanding that no longer tolerates the vicious name-calling, depreciation, and distrustfulness typical of international relations.

It is also possible to imagine a large, mature segment of the aging population, freed from the tension of keeping pace with competitors in the workplace, able to pursue vigorously art activities of all varieties. This would bring an extraordinary liveliness and artfulness to ordinary life. Only a limited portion of our adult population now has either the time or the money to be involved in activities of art expression or as appreciative supporters of the performing arts. Widespread participation in the arts is possible only if children are encouraged to develop those roots of imaginative play that arise from stimulating sensory experience. Elders learn this as they undertake to open these new doors of experience and could promote the inclusion of the arts in the educational system. The arts offer a common language, and the learning of that language in childhood could contribute to an interconnection among the world’s societies.

The development of a new class of elders requires a continued upgrading of all facilities for the health care and education of people at all stages of life, from infancy to old age. Organisms that are to function for a hundred years need careful early nurturing and training. Education must prepare the individual not only for the tasks of early and middle age, but for those of old age as well. Training is mandatory for both productive work and the

understanding and care of the senses and the body as a whole. Participation in activities that can enrich an entire lifetime must be promoted and made readily available. In fact, a more general acceptance of the developmental principle of the life cycle could alert people to plan their entire lives more realistically, especially to provide for the long years of aging.

Having started our “joint reflections” with some investigation of the traditional themes of “age” and “stages,” a closing word should deal with the modern changes in our conception of the length and the role of old age in the total life experience. As we have described, modern statistics predict for our time and the immediate future a much longer life expectancy for the majority of old individuals rather than for a select few. This amounts to such a radical change in our concept of the human life cycle that we question whether we should not review all the earlier stages in the light of this development. Actually, we have already faced the question of whether a universal old age of significantly greater duration suggests the addition to our cycle of a ninth stage of development with its own quality of experience, including, perhaps, some sense or premonition of immortality. A decisive fact, however, has remained unchanged for all the earlier stages, namely, that they are all significantly evoked by biological and evolutionary development necessary for any organism and its psychosocial matrix. This also means that each stage, in turn, must surrender its dominance to the next stage, when its time has come. Thus, the developmental ages for the pre-adult life stages decisively remain the same, although the interrelation of all the stages depends somewhat on the emerging personality and the psychosocial identity of each individual in a given historical setting and time perspective.

Similarly, it must be emphasized that each stage, once given, is woven into the fates of all. Generativity, for example, dramatically precedes the last stage, that of old age, establishing the contrast between the dominant images of generativity and of death: one cares for what one has generated in this existence while simultaneously preexperiencing the end of it all in death.

It is essential to establish in the experience of the stages a psychosocial identity, but no matter how long one's life expectancy is, one must face oneself as one who shares an all-human existential identity, as creatively given form in the world religions. This final "arrangement" must convince us that we are meant as

"grandparents," to share the responsibility of the generations for each other. When we finally retire from familial and generational involvement, we must, where and when possible, bond with other old-age groups in different parts of the world, learning to talk and to listen with a growing sense of all-human mutuality.

Reading 4: The Measure of My Days

Florida Scott-Maxwell

Age puzzles me. I thought it was a quiet time. My seventies were interesting and fairly serene, but my eighties are passionate. I grow more intense as I age. To my own surprise, I burst out with hot conviction. Only a few years ago, I enjoyed my tranquility; now I am so disturbed by the outer world and by human quality in general that I want to put things right, as though I still owed a debt to life. I must calm down. I am far too frail to indulge in moral fervor.

Old people are not protected from life by engagements, pleasures, or duties; we are open to our own sentience; we cannot get away from it, and it is too much. We should ward off the problematic and, above all, the insoluble. These are far, far too much, but it is just these that attract us. Our one safety is to draw in and enjoy the simple and immediate. We should rest within our own confines. It may be dull and restricted, but it can be satisfying within our own walls. I feel most real when alone, even most alive when alone. . . .

Age is truly a time of heroic helplessness. One is confronted by one's own incorrigibility. I am always saying to myself, "Look at you, and after a lifetime of trying." I still have the vices that I have known and struggled with—well it seems like since birth. Many

of them are modified, but not much. I can neither order nor command the hubbub of my mind. Or is it my nervous sensibility? This is not the effect of age; age only defines one's boundaries. Life has changed me greatly, it has improved me greatly, but it has also left me practically the same. I cannot spell, and I am overcritical, egocentric, and vulnerable. I cannot be simple. In my effort to be clear, I become complicated. I know my faults so well that I pay them small heed. They are stronger than I am. They are me. . . .

Another day to be filled, to be lived silently, watching the sky and the lights on the wall. No one will come probably. I have no duties except to myself. That is not true. I have a duty to all who care for me—not to be a problem, not to be a burden. I must carry my age lightly for all our sakes, and thank God I still can. Oh that I may to the end. Each day, then, must be filled with my first duty, I must be "all right." But is this assurance not the gift we all give to each other daily, hourly? . . .

Another secret we carry is that, although drab outside—wreckage to the eye mirrors a mortification—inside we flame with a wild life that is almost incommunicable. In silent, hot rebellion, we cry silently—"I have lived my life haven't I?"

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What more is expected of me?" Have we got to pretend out of noblesse oblige that age is nothing, in order to encourage the others? This we do with a certain haughtiness, realizing now that we have reached the place beyond resignation, a place I had no idea existed until I had arrived here.

It is a place of fierce energy. Perhaps passion would be a better word than energy, for the sad fact is this vivid life cannot be used. If I try to transpose it into action, I am soon spent. It has to be accepted as passionate life, perhaps the life I never lived, never guessed I had it in me to live. It feels other and more than that. It feels like the far side of precept and aim. It is just life, the natural intensity of life, and when old we have it for our reward and undoing. It can—at moments—feel as though we had it for our glory. Some of it must go beyond good and bad, for at times—although this comes rarely, unexpectedly—it is a swelling clarity as though all was resolved. It has no content, it seems to expand us, it does not derive from the body, and then it is gone. It may be a degree of consciousness which lies outside activity and which when young we are too busy to experience. . . .

It has taken me all the time I've had to become myself, yet now that I am old, there are times when I feel I am barely here, no room for me at all. I remember that in the last months of my pregnancies, the child seemed to claim almost all my body, my strength, my breath, and I held on wondering if my burden was my enemy, uncertain as to whether my life was at all mine. Is life a pregnancy? That would make death a birth.

Easter Day. I am in that rare frame of mind when everything seems simple—when I have no doubt that the aim and solution of life is the acceptance of God. It is impossible, imperative, and clear. To open to such unimaginable greatness affrights my smallness. I do not know what I seek, cannot know, but I am where the mystery is the certainty.

My long life has hardly given me time—I cannot say to understand—but to be able to imagine that God speaks to me, says simply—"I keep calling to you, and you do not come," and I answer quite naturally—"I couldn't, until I knew there was nowhere else to go." . . .

I am uncertain whether it is a sad thing or a solace to be past change. One can improve one's character to the very end, and no one is too young in these days to put the old right. The late clarities will be put down to our credit I feel sure.

It was something other than this that had caught my attention. In fact, it was the exact opposite. It was the comfortable number of things about which we need no longer bother. I know I am thinking two ways at once, justified and possible in a notebook. Goals and efforts of a lifetime can at last be abandoned. What a comfort. One's conscience? Toss the fussy thing aside. Rest, rest. So much over, so much hopeless, some delight remaining.

One's appearance, a lifetime of effort put into improving that, most of it ill judged. Only neatness is vital now, and one can finally live like a humble but watchful ghost. You need not plan holidays because you can't take them. You are past all action, all decision. In very truth, the old are almost free, and if it is another way of saying that our lives are empty, well—there are days when emptiness is spacious and non-existence elevating. When old, one has only one's soul as company. There are times when you can feel it crying, you do not ask why. Your eyes are dry, but heavy, hot tears drop on your heart. There is nothing to do but wait and listen to the emptiness which is sometimes gentle. You and the day are quiet, and you have no comment to make. . . .

I don't like to write this down, yet it is much in the minds of the old. We wonder how much older we have to become and what degree of decay we may have to endure. We keep whispering to ourselves, "Is this age yet? How far must

I go?" For age can be dreaded more than death. "How many years of vacuity? To what degree of deterioration must I advance?" Some want death now as a release from old age; some say they will accept death willingly, but in a few years. I feel the solemnity of death and the possibility of some form of continuity. Death feels a friend because it will release us from the deterioration of which we cannot see the end. It is waiting for death that wears us down and the distaste for what we may become.

These thoughts are with us always, and in our hearts we know ignominy as well as dignity. We are people to whom something important is about to happen. But before then, these endless years before the end, we can summon enough merit to warrant a place for ourselves. We go into the future not knowing the answer to our question.

But we also find that as we age we are more alive than seems likely, convenient, or even bearable. Too often our problem is the fervor of life within us. My dear fellow octogenarians, how are we to carry so much life, and what are we to do with it?

Let no one say it is "unlived life" with any of the simpler psychological certitudes. No one lives all the life of which he was capable. The unlived life in each of us must be the future of humanity. When truly old, too frail to use the vigor that pulses in us, and weary, sometimes even scornful, of what can seem the pointless activity of mankind, we may sink down to some deeper level and find a new supply of life that amazes us.

All is uncharted and uncertain; we seem to lead the way into the unknown. It can feel as though all our lives we have been caught in absurdly small personalities, circumstances, and beliefs. Our accustomed shell cracks here, cracks there, and that tiresomely rigid person we supposed to be

ourselves stretches, expands, and, with all inhibitions, is gone. We realize that age is neither failure nor disgrace, although mortifying we did not invent it. Age forces us to deal with idleness, emptiness, not being needed, not able to do, helplessness just ahead perhaps. All this is true, but one has had one's life, one could be full to the brim. Yet it is the end of our procession through time, and our steps are uncertain.

Here we come to a new place of which I knew nothing. We come to where age is boring, one's interest in it by-passed; further on, go further on, one finds that one has arrived at a larger place still, the place of release. There one says,

Age can seem a debacle, a rout of all one most needs, but that is not the whole truth. What of the part of us, the nameless, boundless part who experienced the rout, the witness who saw so much go, who remains undaunted and knows with clear conviction that there is more to us than age? Part of that which is outside age has been created by age, so there is gain as well as loss. If we have suffered defeat we are somewhere, somehow beyond the battle. . . .

A long life makes me feel nearer truth, yet it won't go into words, so how can I convey it? I can't, and I want to. I want to tell people approaching and perhaps fearing age that it is a time of discovery. If they say, "Of what?" I can only answer, "We must each find out for ourselves, otherwise it won't be discovery." I want to say, "If at the end of your life you have only yourself, it is much. Look, you will find."

Focus on Practice

Conscious Aging

In recent years, there has been a surge of public interest in spiritual topics especially related to development in later life. This interest in things spiritual takes different forms, ranging from an interest in exotic New Age phenomena to a revival of traditional mystical teachings from Judaism and Christianity.

Some recent research suggests that mystical experience is becoming more common, with broad implications for an aging society. For example, Jeffrey Levin (1993) looked at age differences in reports of extrasensory perception, spiritualism, and numinous experience, which he defined as being “close to a powerful, spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself.” Using data from a representative cross-sectional population survey, Levin found that between 1973 and 1988, composite mysticism scores increased with successive age cohorts. Private and subjective religiosity is positively related to overall mystical experience, but organizational religiosity is inversely related, suggesting that those pursuing spiritual growth may find it in places other than services in a house of worship. In light of Levin’s findings, it is not surprising that large proportions of older Americans are already making use of so-called alternative therapies, including meditation, as part of their health practices (McMahan & Lutz, 2004).

Compared with European societies, the United States has historically been more religiously oriented, but spiritual revival today goes beyond mainstream religion. *Individual growth* is the new watchword. In keeping with that trend, one of the most fascinating developments today is the rise of *conscious aging*, an idea based on an assumption that late life can be a period for positive spiritual

growth. Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, a pioneer of the Jewish Renewal movement, and Ram Dass, once a Harvard psychology professor and later a spiritual teacher, emerged as national leaders of the conscious-aging movement. Holistic health care, life review, and mystical religion are all important elements in conscious aging (Schachter-Shalomi & Miller, 1995).

A central practice of conscious aging is personal meditation (Goleman, 1988), whether it takes the form of yoga, Zen, and other Eastern disciplines or the form of contemplative prayer, which has a long history in the Christian church. Meditation as a spiritual discipline is a way of looking at ourselves as beings with depths beyond the conscious mind or ego. The same outlook permeates the work of Jungian psychiatrist Allan Chinen (1989), who has opened up new vistas for the interpretation of fairy tales about the second half of life. Conscious aging represents a coming together of religion and psychology so that each can enrich the other.

Conscious aging goes beyond conventional assumptions about adaptation or personality development over the life course. An early proponent of this view was Abraham Maslow, founder of humanistic psychology. Maslow believed that most people use only a small part of human potential, a potential demonstrated in what he called “peak experiences.” At these high points in our life, we have a chance to move toward self-actualization, that is, to become more fulfilled as human beings. Maslow himself believed that most people who are self-actualized are to be found among those who are mature in years—middle-aged or older.

Mainstream psychology has, for the most part, not looked closely at the higher reaches of human potential, whether in young people or in old. One result of that limitation may be the “decline-and-fall” view of aging criticized by researchers who have looked at the emergence of wisdom in later life (Baltes, 1993). But some lifespan developmental psychologists go further. They argue that mature thought in adulthood entails a dimension of transcendence (Miller & Cook-Greuter, 1994), the province of transpersonal psychology (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993). Transpersonal psychology includes elements such as attention training, emotional transformation, refining awareness, and the achievement of wisdom through detachment and integration.

The conscious-aging perspective may have something to contribute to gerontology on matters such as health care, intergenerational relations, and adult education. For example, research over the past two decades has documented the tangible benefits of meditation for physical and mental health. What happens in meditation has long been familiar to medical and psychological researchers under the name of *autogenic training*, or self-induced modification of lower brain centers. More than two decades ago, Herbert Benson of Harvard Medical School published his groundbreaking article on the “relaxation response,” which explained altered states of consciousness in yoga and Zen in terms of the central nervous system. Since then, extensive research on biofeedback and alpha waves in the brain has confirmed the feasibility of studying consciousness.

There has also been some interesting experimental confirmation of strategies of conscious aging as a means of overcoming what psychologist Robert Kastenbaum (1984) calls **habituation**. In Kastenbaum’s view, the essence of aging is a process of becoming gradually deadened or more mechanical in our response to life because of the power of

habits. By contrast, meditation can be viewed as a progressive growth in powers of attention to overcome habituation in old stimulus–response patterns.

Conscious aging is a struggle to establish new cognitive structures, new ways of looking at the world. Researcher Arthur Deikman (1966/1990) has described how the process of deautomatization can come from practicing meditative disciplines such as yoga or Zen. Deikman, for instance, conducted a procedure of “experimental meditation,” after which subjects reported sensory experience that was more vivid and luminous. Deikman’s work and other experiments like it suggest that deliberate concentration and meditation can modify the selectivity of sensory input to the brain.

These findings could have implications for an aging society. For example, a controlled study in a geriatric population found that meditation-relaxation techniques can have a major impact in reducing anxiety and depression, an impact superior to conventional cognitive-behavioral techniques (DeBerry, Davis, & Reinhard, 1989). Another study, funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, looked at the impact of transcendental meditation to see whether it can have benefits beyond simple relaxation. That study confirmed the point that cultivation of *mindfulness*, a state of consciousness free of content but alert, does have measurable consequences for learning, cognitive flexibility, and overall mental health. These positive results remained with the participants years later (Alexander et al., 1989).

Conscious aging is trying to apply these lessons from research and practice to a growing older population. Interest in health promotion, productive aging, and lifelong learning is likely to make conscious aging a subject of continuing importance as the United States becomes an aging society in the 21st century. It may prove an intriguing glimpse of things to come.

QUESTIONS FOR WRITING, REFLECTION, AND DEBATE

1. Some critics have argued that disengagement theory may have accurately characterized the behavior of the older population in the 1950s, but that it was a mistake to infer that this pattern was universal. According to these critics, activity theory or continuity theory might well be a better description of how older people live today. If the critics' view is correct, does it mean that any theories of aging simply express the way aging appears at a certain time in history? If so, how would it be possible to develop an account that is more general and not limited to a certain time and place?
2. The United States as a society tends to place a high value on success and achievement. Does that fact suggest that the goal of successful aging is an appropriate approach to thinking about growing old in the United States? Are there aspects of growing older that could present a problem for the goal of successful aging?
3. Psychologist Carl Jung believed that the psychological goal of later life is to become more and more oneself as an individual. What does this goal mean in practice? What drawbacks to this idea can you think of? If we adopt Jung's approach, how would we evaluate older people who remain very much as they have always been, in contrast to older people who dramatically change their lives, say, after the point of retirement or widowhood?
4. Imagine that you are now 80 years old and have discovered that you may not have long to live. Your grandchildren have asked you to write about what you've learned about the meaning of life, especially in the last few years. In your statement, contrast what you believe now (as a future 80-year-old) with what you believed in the past (at what is your present age).
5. Assume that you are the activities director of a church-affiliated nursing home that prides itself on promoting the residents' quality of life. Write a memo for the nursing home director outlining a range of activities that would help enhance the residents' sense of the meaning of life in the long-term care facility.
6. Is the idea of meaning in life something purely personal and private, or does it have some wider social importance? Does discussing the question of meaning give us an understanding of older people's behavior, or is it simply confusing? In addressing this question, consider other issues discussed in this book, such as assisted suicide, work and leisure, and the allocation of health care resources for life prolongation. How would the idea of a meaning for old age affect one's view of these questions?
7. Consider carefully Lars Tornstam's concept of *gerotranscendence*. Using only the simplest and most everyday language, try to give an explanation of gerotranscendence to a friend or relative who knows nothing about gerontology and is not particularly sympathetic to religion.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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