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The New Aging: Self Construction and Social Values

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"To look at people over sixty five in terms of work, health, and productivity would be to treat them compassionate or contemptuous care."
-Betty Friedan, *The Fountain of Age*

Historically speaking the aged in the United States have largely suffered through what may be characterized as a Dark Age. As Michael Harrington characterized it in 1969,"America tends to make its people miserable when they become old. [They are] plagued by ill health; they do not have enough money; they are socially isolated." (p. 32) Richard Margolis (1990) suggests that we have given "into a heavy fatalism that recalls Seneca's dismissal of old age as 'an incurable disease.' We see feebleness, helplessness, mindlessness. The evidence...is all around us." (p.112) There is a habit of seeing a population of "frail elders, locked within their homes, as rather passive and as prisoners of their illnesses." (Rubinstein, Kilbride, & Nagy, 1992, x) As Margaret Gullette (1997), proposes, our history is such that we treat longevity as "solely a disaster. (Perhaps men should congratulate themselves on dying younger!)." (p. 186) And as the Gray Panthers' television monitoring task force concluded in the late 1970s, older people were typically depicted as "ugly, toothless, sexless, incontinent, senile, confused and helpless..."

This Dark Age condition has been intensified by certain dominant values in American culture. Two of these bear special attention. First the *individualist* tradition - holding each person to be a free agent, capable of making his/her own decisions, choosing his/her own way of life - has long been a cultural mainstay of American life (Rubinstein, Kilbride, & Nagy, 1992). While broadly celebrated, the value placed on the self-determining agent is also deeply problematic (cf. Lasch, 1979; Sampson, 1988). It invites attention to one's self - "my development, aspirations, emotions, needs" and the like. Other persons are thereby relegated to a secondary status. As Bellah and his colleagues propose, such a value threatens close ties of intimacy - both in the family and community (1985).

Individualist values serve as a double-edge sword to the elderly. Through various exigencies, maintaining one's own individual status as an independent person may be threatened. Becoming vulnerable to illnesses and disabilities and/or losing economic self-sufficiency, the elderly have often reduced the freedom of those on whom they rely. When self-agency is primary, the aging dependent is an imposition on others. At the same time the aged person becomes dependent, he/she may suffer from the sense of diminished agency. "I am no longer capable of free action or expression; I am a dead weight." On the other hand, those who remain healthy and economically self-sufficient chose to remain alone, often separated geographically from family. Not being a burden means preserving one's individuality, and this entails not asking for

greater connection to family members.

Also contributing to the Dark Ages of aging has been the traditional value of productivity. With deep roots in Protestant ethics and the spirit of pragmatism, there is a strong tendency to equate personal worth with productive achievement (Hochschild, 1997). Within the capitalist economy, productive achievement is typically associated with the earning of wages. Thus as one retires from the workplace, one's personal worth becomes questionable. One is "sidelined," "put out to pasture," or becomes a "has been." This displacement is especially important to men, for whom one's career success is directly entwined with one's sense of identity (M. Gergen, 1992). As feminist critics point out, being productive also affects the valuation of the maturing woman (Martin,1997). Because women's "production" is so frequently allied with their capacity to bear children, they are doubly vulnerable to being found wanting. The onset of menopause signals for them a loss of worth. Women thus suffer from the sense of being "barren," "empty," or "without a nest." Within this context of values, women face the specter of being "finished at forty" when their biological productivity begins to cease (M. Gergen, 1990).

Yet, in our view history is not destiny, and we now stand on the threshold of an entirely new range of conceptions and practices. As we shall hope to demonstrate, the Dark Ages of aging are giving way to a New Aging. To appreciate this movement and its potentials we shall set the stage by briefly laying out the social constructionist perspective from which we approach the issues. Then we shall consider the changing conditions of aging, with special attention to demographic and economic factors. This will enable us to appreciate what we feel is a substantial and pervasive movement toward the re-construction of aging in contemporary society. In particular, movements toward the erasure of age, re-empowerment, and sybaritic lifestyles will occupy our attention. Finally we shall propose that these altered images and practices are now transforming the matrix of values and practices within the culture. The aged are ceasing to be the byproducts of a cultural mainstream, but are instead altering the very character of mainstream society.

The Social Construction of Value and the Aging Self

We approach the issues of cultural values and the aging self from the standpoint of social constructionism (K. Gergen, 1994; M. Gergen, in press; Gergen & Davis, 1997). Social constructionism in social science was born within dialogues spanning a variety of disciplines - including science and technology studies, the history of science, cultural anthropology, literary theory, women's studies, and cultural studies among them. Of focal importance in social constructionist writings are the social processes giving rise to our common understandings of the world - what we take to be the real and the good. For the constructionist all that has meaning in our lives - that which we take to be knowledge, reason, and right - has its origins within the matrix of relationships in which we are engaged. This is not the place for a full treatment of the constructionist standpoint. However, it is important to understand key implications for the present undertaking. Let us briefly consider the pivotal

concepts of value and the aging self.

Regarding cultural values, social constructionism is scarcely controversial. We commonly hold that values vary greatly across cultures and across history. We are not by nature of our genes required to place a strong value on money, conquering space, or having a good figure. Some may bridle when it comes to issues of universal value - perhaps there are, or at least should be, universal goods (e.g. freedom from oppression). And there may be economists and sociobiologists who will plump for the intrinsic desire for self gain or selfishness. However, from our standpoint we are inclined to see all value as having its genesis in human relationship - including the value placed on human life, longevity, and health. In terms of the aging process in society, we are thus inclined to emphasize malleability. The cultural values that inform our conceptions of aging, along with the value we derive (or fail to derive) from aging itself are thus subject to fluctuation and transformation (cf.Shweder, 1998; Hashimoto, 1996). Further, and most essential for the present thesis, the aging population may serve as a source for creating its own values. Values are generated from within relationships; with increasing relatedness there is increasing potential for self-sustaining values to prevail over those emanating from the exterior.

With regard to the concept of the aging self, constructionist theses are particularly catalytic. There is a widespread tendency within the social and biological sciences to search for the *naturalized life course*, that is, to chart the innate development and decline of human capacities, tendencies, proclivities and so on over the life-span. This tendency is strongest in the sciences of child development and aging, with the first largely devoted to setting standards for normal growth and the latter for decline (cf. Cunningham & Brookbank, 1988; Erikson,1963; Kagan, 1984; Levinson, 1979; Santrock, 1986). With its strong emphasis on culturally and historically situated knowledge, social constructionism serves as a challenge to these efforts. In this respect, much life-span developmental literature is helpful. In particular, studies of separate age cohorts suggests that many possible life trajectories are possible, and that what is fixed about human change may be small (Helson, Mitchell & Moore, 1984; Neugarten, 1969; Stewart and Ostrove, 1998). As life-span doyen, Bernice Neugarten (1980), proposed almost 20 years ago, we are slowly becoming an *age-irrelevant society*, in the sense that we are "becoming accustomed to the 28 year old mayor... the 50 year old retiree, the 65 year old father of a preschooler and the 70 year old student."

Social constructionist dialogues add important dimension to this possibility. For the constructionist whatever we may observe about human action over time places no necessary demands on our interpretations. In this sense there is nothing about changes in the human body that require a concept of age, of development, or decline. There is no process of aging *in itself*; the discourse of aging is born of relations within a given culture at a given time (Hazan, 1994). In other cultural conditions alternative interpretations are invited. For example, as Richard Shweder (1998) observes, for the Gusii people of West Kenya, "decline and obsolescence are not the meanings associated with the increased sense of ‘seniority’ that a Gusii man or

woman develops over time. Seniority is associated instead with respect, obedience, prestige, and social esteem."(pg. xv) More dramatically, there is nothing about the conditions of what we call the "human body" that demands such terms as "disease" and "incapacity." Not only is what we call "the body" subject to widely differing conceptions (Young, 997), but the suffering associated with a "disease" may depend strongly on the interpretive stance one takes toward it. For example, as Frank (1995) proposes, viewing oneself as "a victim" of disease as opposed to "a moral witness" has powerful implications for one's sense of well-being.

Of special relevance to the present offering, we must also view the scientific literature of late-life decline as culturally constructed. That is, the extensive research demonstrating deterioration of physical and psychological functioning during the latter span of life is not a simple reflection of what is there. Rather, that a given configuration constitutes "decline" - or indeed, is worth mentioning at all - derives from a particular domain of values (such as productivity and individualism), sets of assumptions, ways of talking and measuring, and so on. In effect, to find someone biologically or cognitively impaired constitute what Gubrium, Holstein and Buckholdt (1994) call a *collaborative accomplishment.* It is an accomplishment of a particular professional group, working with particular assumptions and values, within a supportive culture. And so it is that we must continuously reflect on the way in which the sciences construct the life-course, and most particularly accounts that treat decline as a natural fact of growing older. As Dannefer (1998) puts the case**,** "Naturalization is a highly effective mechanism of social legitimation because it is difficult to oppose that which is seen as natural. When (the rhetoric of naturalization) remains unacknowledged in scientific discourse, science is itself engaged in the legitimation of prevailing social arrangements."

It is also when we avoid tendencies toward naturalization, when we become conscious of contingency, that we begin to appreciate possibilities of cultural transformation. When the taken for granted becomes "one supposition among many," we are alerted to the potentials of reconstructing the course of aging in more positive ways (Hazan, 1994). The American construction of aging has yielded enormous suffering, and it could be otherwise (cf. Gergen, 1996; Kaplan, 1997, Campioni, 1997). We shall return to this challenge shortly.

It should be noted, however, that constructionism cautions us to be aware, as well, of the constructed character of the present contribution. Our remarks should not be taken, then, as accurate and objective reports on what is the case, but as a way of understanding our world. Our primary hope is that this particular form of understanding will harbor promising potentials for our collective future.

Contemporary Conditions of Aging

As suggested earlier, our central argument is that major transformations in the construction of aging are currently taking place in the United States. In our view, the origin of these transformations may be traced to emerging conditions of society. In

effect, the Dark Ages of aging were tied closely to a particular configuration of social and economic conditions. As these conditions disappear into the maw of history, so is the way opened for transformations in construction. Before exploring the specific forms of transformation, it is thus essential to glimpse some central changes in societal conditions. Pivotally important are changes in demographics, economics, and technology:

Population: The Elder Explosion

Of chief significance to our thesis are demographic changes in the population, and particularly the growth in the population over 60 years of age. With steady increases in health and longevity along with simultaneous decrements in the birthrate, the proportion of the population over 60 has been steadily increasing. As widely acknowledge, by the year 2030 one in five Americans will be 65 or older, the majority of which will be women.(Peterson & Somit, 1994, pg. 171) This also means that the potential political power of the aging population is also steadily increasing. By the twenty-first century, a full 25% of the voters in American elections will be over 65. Political power may be even greater than the numbers indicate because older voters are increasingly more likely to cast a ballot. In the 1988 U.S. presidential election, for example, 66% of those eligible to vote did so; among those 60-79, 80% voted!(Peterson & Somit, 1994, pg. 174).

The old are not only becoming more numerous and active politically, but they are also becoming better organized. For example, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) - which began as a small marketing venture - has now become one of the strongest lobbying voices in political life. Its membership now exceeds 32 million. As a result, political wisdom has been shaped to the extent that certain entitlements for the older population have become unassailable. As Tip O'Neill, Senior Congressman from Massachusetts, described it, programs for older people such as Social Security and Medicare, are the "third rail of American politics.'Touch it and you die'." (Morris, 1996 p. xi).

Finally, with respect to the construction of meaning, the aging have more peers with whom to interact than ever before, and with increasing alacrity are seeking them out. In earlier times the aging were scattered minority members in most communities, often sequestered in homes with younger relatives; now in some areas of the country (e.g. in Florida, Arizona, southern California) they are in the majority. With increasing numbers have come forms of self-organized segregation. Communities have been established exclusively for people over a certain age; young adults and children are prohibited as permanent residents. Limits are even set on how long younger people may visit. Essentially this means that in negotiating issues of value, self, and aging they may rely on others like themselves as opposed to a younger population for whom aging is an alien and often threatening stage of life.

Economics: Elder Power

A second cultural shift accentuates the effects of the first. Not only are the aging becoming proportionally more numerous, but they are also becoming increasingly powerful economically. As Charles Morris comments, "One of the great embarrassments of American's 1960's War on Poverty was the discovery that the largest number of poor Americans were not Appalachian cabin dwellers or minorities in urban slums but old people living on Social Security. Payroll taxes had been kept low over the years .... until Richard Nixon and a Democratic Congress massively liberalized the system in 1973 and 1974. Over the two years benefit levels were raised by about 35 percent and they were indexed for inflation. From that point on benefits were automatically increased each year to keep pace with the Consumer Price Index....The benefit increases ...were enormously successful in lifting the nation's old people out of poverty."(Morris, 1996, pg. 77-78) Between 1966 and 1974, the poverty rate among the elderly was cut in half; today American's elderly are less likely than nonelderly to be poor. While it is still true that pockets of deep poverty characterize certain groups of the elderly, especially African American women, the general economic differences are substantial. For example, between 1988 and 1991 senior wealth grew by 20% while median wealth for the country as a whole grew by about 2%. In 1986 the average seventy year old had 71% of the buying power of a 30 year old. Just 10 years later, in 1996, the seventy year old has acquired 18% more to spend than the 30 year old (Morris, 1996).

Technology: Generational Arrival

A third shift in cultural conditions also demands brief attention - perhaps more as a precis of the future than a posit of the present. One of the most profound transformations of the present century has been the insinuation of communication technologies into everyday life. From the early development of the telephone, telegraph and radio to the more recent mushrooming of television, mobile phones, and the computer, American society has been moving into a condition of intense sociation (see Gergen, 1991). The availability of others- whether face to face or mediated - steadily increases. Multitudes await the mere flicking of a television or computer switch. Perhaps the most dramatic transformation lies within the domain of computer technology, where - through the internet and Web - two-way communication is facilitated on a global scale. With these technologies not only are relations easily generated and sustained, but like-minded persons can rapidly organize around a given issue and make their cause known to thousands.

While the majority of the elderly population tends toward technophobia, cohorts of technologically sophisticated individuals are now entering retirement. Increasingly the aging population is becoming "wired." Numerous bulletin boards, self-help groups, and chat lines devoted to issues of aging are beginning to emerge. Other individuals are available for dialogue any hour of the day or night. Further, because age markers can be removed, an elderly person can enter into discussions on virtually any topic with people from around the country - or the world, without encountering the prejudices otherwise confronted in face-to-face interactions. Equally important, these technologies now facilitate an increasing degree of organization among the

elderly. Opinions can be shared, agendas put forward, funds generated, and programs

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Insert on Web Sites for the Aging

- often of national significance - mounted. For example, ThirdAge.com is a website welcoming some 500,000 visitors every month. This site is oriented to people who might be called seniors or older citizens, but a new, more upbeat designation (Third Age) has been chosen to represent their position. Databases of information and resources, experts, community forums, and shopping sites are all available. For example, a virtual bank offers retirement planning facilities, Toys'R Us offers an order service for grandparents, a nutritional database supplies information on vitamins and minerals, IBM sponsors "E-Business Entrepreneur - a guide for those wanting to generate a Web business. Again, the power of self-construction is augmented.

Routes Toward Reconstruction

As we find, the older population is expanding, its economic and political bases are stronger, and its technological sophistication rapidly growing. We thus confront a population of persons with enormous resources for self-construction, for generating and sharing conceptions of the self, age, and personal value. Here is a population that can increasingly resist the constructions of others - how it is that youth, the non-mature employed, or the health professions construe their lives - and dictate the terms by which they will understand themselves. In our view this is precisely what is taking place, and in steadily increasing degree. It is not a process that is equally effective across all sectors of the aging population, nor is it a process that can be completed. The challenge of sustaining a viable reality is continuous.

Most important for present purposes, there is no single, pervasive model for the New Aging. Rather, we find important manifestations of at least three significant images, each accompanied by particular patterns of living, and each with different implications for cultural futures. For analytic purposes we shall treat them as "pure types," recognizing that any single individual may represent a pastiche of multiple tendencies. We may distinguish, then, among emerging constructions of *eternal youth*, *re-empowerment*, and *sybaritic expansion*.

Eternal Youth

The most pervasive form of reconstruction derives from the longstanding binary of "old" vs. "young" and the traditional privileging of the latter over the former. National surveys consistently find that in spite of calendar age, fewer than 10% of the population will identify themselves as "old." As Betty Friedan (1993) notes, in some

senior citizens clubs members are fined for simply mentioning the word "old." Investigators have even coined the term, *gerophobic* to describe the extreme fear of aging. Margaret Gullette (1997) proposes that age is, "internalized is a stressor, a depressant -- what I want to call a psychocultural illness."(pg. 193) With a prevailing fear of being "no longer young," it is scarcely surprising that the image of the aging body is a primary target for reconstruction. Such refusal to disappear silently into the night of old age is vivified in research carried out by Mary Gergen (1989) with a group of women between 42-48. The study took the form of a focus group, treating the issue of menopause. During the discussion the women recalled stories they head heard from others on the miseries related to menopause - women going crazy, drying up, losing their looks, getting divorced, becoming aggressive and angry witches, etc. However, in the course of their conversation they came to agree that such dire consequences of menopause would not mar their lives. They would refuse to be victims. Rather, they would construct another way out. As one discussant said, "We'll do it differently. There has never been such a good looking group of women our age. We are healthy, strong, athletic, and smart. We'll just play right through it!"

And it is this "playing through it" that occupies the time and efforts of an increasing segment of the older generations. As research on Americans' use of time indicates, life over 65 typically is marked by gains is disposable time. Most interesting, increasingly over the past 20 years this time is being devoted to personal care and grooming (Robinson and Godbey, 1997). Nor are such practices limited to those entering their 60s. Fighting body fat, graying hair and balding pates, age spots, varicose veins, yellowing teeth, and facial wrinkles are pervasive even among those in their 30s and 40s. Charles Longino at the University of Miami's Center for Social Research in Aging has coined the term "youth creep" to describe this condition of ever more youthful looking older people. Using the rather unflattering terms of gerontology, he said, "The Old group seems younger as the decades pass...The Old Old seem like the Young Old of a few decades earlier." (quoted in Margolis, 1990, pg. 112-113).

Visual Collage I

One of the chief reasons for the widespread popularity of the option to erase age markers derives from its support by a range of ancillary, profit-making institutions: popular writers, pharmaceutical companies, plastic surgeons, dentists, opticians, beauticians, fitness centers, diet centers, and more. All are economic stakeholders in agelessness. For example, Deepak Chopra's popular volume, Ageless body, timeless mind, promises the aging that, "The field of human life is open and unbounded. At its deepest level, your body is ageless, your mind timeless." (1993, p.7) The medical profession is an increasingly noteworthy participant in the economy of agelessness. In 1998 a convention of the newly created, Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine, hosted

over 4,000 participants. Dozens of physicians have become certified experts in "anti-aging medicine," and the Academy now publishes the Journal of Anti-Aging Medicine. Concomitantly, a new medical field, *Cenegenics* - Greek for "new beginning" is emerging, a field dedicated to the science of "youthful aging." The relationship between these institutions and the aging population is fully symbiotic: The quest for agelessness within this economically powerful segment of the culture creates a demand for new products and services and their creation (Viagra, laser skin removal, dental caps and crowns, hair transplants, miracle herbal supplements, skin creams, and hormonal replacement therapies); the existence of the products and services then function as an invitation to the population to remain youthful.

Yet, in spite of the compelling image of ageless adulthood, there are also important limitations to this life orientation. There is for one the continuous and increasing effort and expense required to "maintain the appearance," and the accompanying backdrop of anxiety over the accumulating indicators (both actual and imagined) that the youthful attributes are eroding. Further, if the defining physical indicators of youth remain fixed, the aspirant must inevitably fail. The supports for self-esteem are ultimately removed. At the same time, the picture may not be as dark as this scenario suggests. As we scan the horizons of various media we begin to detect a new variation on the quest for eternal youth. Specifically there are manifestations of a *glamorization of age*. In this case the attempt is not to emulate the young, but to employ certain vestiges or markers of traditional glamour to redefine age. For example, increasingly we find the use of graying hair and mature, attractive older faces for marketing a product, as well as the presence of older models in ads for expensive

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Visual collage II

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luxury items - perfume, diamonds, watches, wines, cruises, exotic travel itineraries, exclusive residential units, and prestige sedans. The potentials for reconstructing the marks of age as beautiful are substantial.

Re-Empowering: Reclaiming Agency and Productivity

Earlier we proposed that cultural investments in individual agency and productivity threaten the elderly with profound losses in self-worth: no longer are they in control of their lives or serving as productive citizens. Yet, in our view the increasing degrees of economic power and self-organizing capacities among the elderly have precipitated strong moves toward the refusal of this characterization and the formation of alternative images and lifestyles. In part the desire for control may be manifest in the increasing attempt by the elderly to function as masters of their own living spaces. As surveys show, some 85% of those over-sixty-five wish to maintain

their own private dwellings for as long as they can (Morris, 1996). The relatively recent emergence of retirement communities also helps speak to these needs for personal autonomy: here residents live fairly independent lives, with a great deal of choice concerning their living spaces, nourishment, entertainment, and social life. The shift to assisted living provides a buffer zone between complete independence and hospitalization or nursing home care.

Some of the most dramatic initiatives to reestablish control are taking place around issues of death. Increasingly the elderly are seeking means of prolonging their lives and terminating them at their will. Prolongation frequently finds expression in fitness programs, dietary regimens, and pharmaceuticals for sustaining health. More symbolic are attempts to establish trust funds, wills, and endowments, to arrange for the disposition of one's personal belongings, and to plan one's own funeral services, all of which sustain control over one's resources after death. Most dramatic are explorations into regenerating a body that has succumbed to death. Walt Disney, among several other imaginative men and women pave the way toward the potential of eternal life by having themselves frozen in specially designed vaults. Others have their eggs and sperm cells frozen for subsequent fertilization. Most well-known, perhaps, are the Nobel prize winners who have donated their sperm for artificial insemination. Equally controversial, but increasingly supported by the adult population, are initiatives to control the circumstances of one's death. For many, fears of aging center on the possible helplessness, pain and personal indignities resulting from the deterioration of bodily functions as death approaches. Thus, movements toward living wills, doctor-assisted suicide and euthanasia become increasingly commonplace as people find ways to extend their personal control to include their own manner of death.

Impulses toward asserting personal control are also manifest in movements toward reconceptualizing productivity - what it is to make a contribution to society. Material income in itself is a highly limited vision of productivity. And there are many precedents from history and culture of alternative means for contributions from aging participants to be regarded as productive. From councils of elders, elder statesmen, and ruling matriarchs in the West to the role of "peace chiefs" and "ritual leaders" in other cultures (cf. Guttman, 1987), images of elderly power are amply available. Thus, with sufficient resources of money, time, and conversational companionship, images of

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USA Today cover story insert

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empowerment can be generated, vivified, and made actionable. Two of these reconstructions of aging are especially interesting:

Wisdom Refigured. Whether or not one subscribes to Carl Jung's (1928) theory of archetypes, we can be grateful to him for revealing the cultural and historical ubiquity of the image of the "old wise man." Religious institutions of today have also served to keep this tradition salient with strong presences of aged leaders - the Pope, Bishop Tutu, the Dali Lama, the Ayatollahs, etc. These images now serve as resources for reconstituting the aging self. Betty Friedan (1996) has written eloquently about the redrawing of the older population as venerable contributors to society, "In their 'late style' artists and scientists, creators and great thinkers seem to move beyond tumult and discord, distracting details and seemingly irreconcilable differences, to unifying principles that give new meaning to what has gone before and presage the agenda of the next generation." And so, she says, all of us can locate in aging a "new wholeness, previewing in the serious or the seemingly irrelevant efforts of our late years new dimensions of life for the next generation."(p.613) It is in this vein that we find increasing media representations of and reliance placed on financially sagacious men (e.g.Alan Greenspan, Warren Buffett) and seasoned advisors and/or leaders of government (Margaret Thatcher, Jimmy Carter, Henry Kissinger). Senator Strom Thurmond will reach 100 years of age when he completes his present term in the American Senate. At the age of 77, Senator John Glenn returned to Earth from his second space flight. There are heroes in other realms of life as well - sports, entertainment, literature, science, journalism, lifestyles, and fashion (Consider Billie Jean King, Walter Kronkite, Maya Angelou, and Dr. Ruth). As the media rekindles the image of wisdom, so is the aging population offered new self-conceptions and social roles.

Visual Collage III

Historical Witnesses. As Alex Kucznyski recently lamented:

"I used to feel bad about being born too late in the 1960's The American generation I fell into grew up feeling a little bit like a bunch of left-out losers because the Baby Boomers would have you know that in order to understand the United States and politics and tragedy and intellectual freedom, you had to have lived through the demonstrations against the Vietnam war and the assassinations of the 1960's. The heroes of my generation were not murdered; we didn't discover LSD; we didn't protest wars. Our hero was the Six Million Dollar Man. All we got was disco, Ronald Reagan, chronic fatigue syndrome and a few halfhearted nostalgic strikes at Columbia University, 20 years too late."(1998, p.12)

Manifestations of "age envy" can best be understood in terms of the way in which the same technologies that circulate the images of the new aging also function to thrust the past into present. Television, film, magazines, newspapers, books, and musical recordings all function to keep the past alive and vivid in the contemporary

imagination. In part, the media continue to recirculate the past because elderly cohorts are a valuable market segment. This is their life, and it is to be savored, reflected upon, and interrogated for meaning. At the same time, for the culture at large the past is a repository of drama - glamour, fame, victories, achievements - essential food for the enormous appetite of the contemporary entertainment business. This tapping of the past even extends to the incessant television reruns - Gilligan's Island, Happy Days, Leave it to Beaver, and I Love Lucy**.** In this context, the aging population increasingly serves the role of historical witness. They not only bear personal testimony to the past - replete with stories, insights, and the drama of "I was there," but they come to symbolize important eras, events, and ways of life. This is most obviously true in the case of public icons - the Ringo Star, the Rolling Stones, Johnny Cash, Joan Baez, and the never aging Beach Boys. In Time Magazine's (May, 1998) competition for the most significant musician of the century, Elvis Presley, an icon of the 50's and Frank Sinatra, whose fame was installed in the 40's were the primary contenders. James Dean's photo continues to adorn the cover of youth magazines. "Swing" lessons, to the tune of the "big band sounds," are offered in clubs across the country. A statue has been erected to Bert Parks in Atlantic City for his contributions to the Miss America pageant. With increased media representation, the role of historical witness is made available to the elderly population more generally - those who "were hippies," "went to Woodstock", "watched the first moon landing," and so on. As the media rhapsodize the past, so do they enable iconic roles to be played by those who "were there." The nostalgia for the excitement, opportunity, freedom, and achievements of the past sustains the value and significance of those who participated.

Sybaritic Selves: The Generation of Joy

A final reconstruction of aging places the central emphasis on pleasure. Owing in part to fortified economic resources, to biological health, and technologies of personal extension, an increasingly large segment of the aging population finds itself in a position to transform "empty hours" into rich and invigorating explorations. Whether in matters of sports such as golf, tennis, fishing, scuba diving, sailing, or bridge; or international travel, pleasure cruising, theater and concert attendance, and fine dining, the aging population is in increasing evidence. Increments in participation have also occurred in domains of personal development - in Yoga training, educational development (e.g Elder Hostel programs, university extension courses), explorations in nature (e.g. hiking, bird watching), and spiritual expansion (e.g. meditation, evangelical movements, retreats). As the advertising world now writes large, "aging is fun and fulfilling." And, of course, the advertising business is essential to the circulation of these images, for these endeavors, like quests for eternal youth, are highly lucrative. Again, the financial power of the aging population facilitates the reconstruction of the images and activities. Economics, commerce and self-restoration walk hand in hand.

Visual Collage IV

One of the most important features of the sybaritic moment is its rewriting of cultural value. The work ethic has long functioned to degrade the value of pleasure. Not to be working is variously to be "goofing off," "loafing," or "wasting time." Yet, the unabashed seeking of pleasure now manifest by the aging - along with the absence of guilt - gives reason for pause. The sybaritic life style places the work ethic in critical relief; the process of reconstruction reverses the priority. Hard work for its own sake becomes increasingly questionable. We shall return to this issue shortly.

Cultural Impact of The New Aging

We began this analysis by pointing to the way in which the aging person had been traditionally situated within the culture, how the matrix of cultural values, economic conditions, and institutional life had given rise to a Dark Age of aging. Yet, this was also a period in which the construction of aging was largely a byproduct of mainstream culture. The aging themselves were essentially victims of a process over which they had little control. In this sense the aged were positioned similarly to other minority groups - African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanics. Yet, powerful grassroots movements - now termed *identity politics* - have begun to challenge the commonplace stereotypes, and to seek means for controlling the images that circulate in the media (cf. Fiske, 1996; Jewell, 1993). Issues of race, ethnicity and gender are now all important considerations in determining who is cast in what media role. Similarly, the aging population has not only begun to challenge the constructions of traditional mainstream culture, but more importantly, to forge its own domain of meaning. In her 1986 volume, The Ageless Self, Sharon Kauffman commented that, "Practicing gerontologists deplore the fact there is no ...valued role for the aged in the United States."(p.165) This era is ending. The aging have begun to generate new criteria of worth, of meaningful activity, and conceptions of age itself.

Additionally, in our view, this command of construction has not only had an impact on those over 50, but it has powerful reverberations outside the aging population itself. Over and above the enhancement of self-worth and the enrichment of lifestyles among the aging, these reconstructions now insinuate themselves into the greater society. They begin to drive mainstream values and practices in various ways. Two of these deserve special attention:

Aging and the Restoration of Civil Society

In his weathervane essay, "Bowling alone: America’s declining social capital" Robert Putnam (1995) argues that voluntary participation in political participation, group membership, and informal socializing have steadily declined over the past quarter century. He warns against the depleting stock of "social capital," people who can contribute time and energy to sustaining "norms, networks, and social trust"

necessary for a viable society. As Michael Walzer (1998) similarly argues, we must rediscover the importance of "the world of family, friends, comrades and colleagues, where people are connected to one another and made responsible for each other." Dialogue on the creation of civil society is now widespread. In our view, the images, values and action potentials of the New Aging form a major answer to this quest. With an expanded population of the elderly, we have a significant expansion in the number of free hours available for use in the culture (Robinson & Godbey,1997). Common wage earners spend more than half of each waking day serving the institutions in which they are employed. Time is essentially converted to products or services. However, with an expanded number of retired persons, the reservoir of personally determined time is radically expanded. And this time is increasingly available for communal contribution.

Further, with the multiple moves toward re-empowerment discussed above, we find the basis for a renewed sense of competence and control. With the shift toward agelessness, there is also an increased sense of vitality. Thus, the aging population stands as a major resource for refurbishing the civil society. In our view, such moves are already significantly present. With the rise of both two-career and single-parent families, grandmothers and grandfathers are becoming increasingly central figures in the lives of developing children. Adult siblings - now consumed by occupations and geographically separated - increasingly rely on their parents to sustain their bonds. Increasingly colleges and universities are pursuing the services, counsel and endowment funds of the alumni who have long since graduated from their institutions. Community governments, civic organizations, and neighborhood security watches also depend increasingly on the services of retired persons. Charitable organizations depend upon the time and energies of older people, who often work in support of their less fortunate peers. Hospital auxiliaries, church thrift shops, Sunday School programs, as well as senior center recreational facilities, mentally retarded centers, prison visitation programs, literacy programs, and other civic betterment activities are staffed in great measure by senior citizens. As Peterson and Somit (1994) conclude from their research on the elderly, among those who are educated and healthy, political knowledge and participation is steadily increasing.

Nor is communal contribution limited to the local arena. For example, the non-profit organization, RSVP International, has developed volunteer programs worldwide designed to enable older adults to use their skill, knowledge, and experience to better the human condition. RSVP volunteers have participated, for example, in programs to improve drainage systems and increase forest growth in Gambia, developed and operated a paper recycling project in Bogota, installed locks and smoke detectors in seniors' homes in Belfast, and taught children to read and write in Dakar.

The reverberations of this shift in the socio-emotional functioning of society may be profound. We spoke earlier of the prevalent value of individualism in the U.S., touching on ways in which individualism and self-absorption were connected, and their detrimental implications for the aging. Yet, the contributions of the aging to the civil society stand in contrast to individualist values. Such activities are largely

voluntary, and thus altruistic in tenor. As these activities gain increasing recognition, so do values of care and love for others become more salient within the culture. The banner of "relatedness" comes to stand as a significant and possibly superior alternative to the pervasive, "me first." While it may seem that the sybaritic tendencies of the aging do not lend themselves so readily to these ends, there is good reason to believe that many enter retirement years not with an "either/or" but a "both/and" disposition. And there can be pleasure alongside practices of community contribution.

The Refiguring of Productivity

As we have proposed, the powerful value placed on economic productivity in the US has traditionally thrust the aging population into an alienated and denigrated status. At the same time, as the work place demands increasing numbers of hours from employees, many in the younger generations find little remaining in the way of leisure time. Not only are there few hours for relaxed enjoyment, physical pleasure, and participation in nature, but as well, little time for family, friends, or community. For many two-career families, there is simply no "spare time" for rearing children and intimate connection. It is under these conditions that the insinuation of the sybaritic image of aging into the culture becomes significant. The widely circulated images of elderly persons strolling arm in arm, on beach holidays, golfing, fishing, cruising, dining, and enjoying grandchildren often stand in stark contrast to the arduous demands of the work world. Nor, given the companionate and equally pervasive image of agelessness, does it appear that such persons are at death's door. The dominant picture is one of decades of relatively unfettered enjoyment.

In our view, there are several interrelated effects of this dramatic contrast. First, there is increasing interest in early retirement. Middle aged persons increasingly attempt to garner sufficient savings and securities that they may escape the workplace. In a related vein, the elderly come increasingly to serve as models for leisure time activity. One cannot overlook, for example, the fact that the game of golf - traditionally a game of the old - has now become ageless. As the young take up the game in increasing numbers so do they emulate the elderly. And to enhance the image of the latter, young Tiger Woods competes with the elderly on even terms - often suffering defeat. And thus the youth/age binary becomes increasingly blurred. It is not the young resisting the image of becoming old so much as attempting to enter a category under transformation.

There is a further implication of this emerging complex that is more difficult to chart, and possibly more a favored fantasy at this juncture than a lived reality. While the cultural value placed on economic productivity has contributed to the prosperity of the nation, there are many who believe that we face the upward limits of economic growth. It is not simply that working hours seem to expand to fill all available space. Rather, it is the more general concern with the limits to growth and progress. The perils of a continuing surge toward increasing prosperity - with its attendant demands for increasing profits, markets, material supplies, and energy - have been widely

documented. Interest in *sustainabl*e - as opposed to steadily expanding - economies is increasingly widespread. However, if sustainability is to be achieved it will require a population oriented toward "satisficing" as opposed to "maximizing." And this is precisely the point at which the new images of age become important. If the values of relaxation, bodily expression, participation in nature and in families become increasingly salient, then work in itself begins to lose value. Increasingly as the cultural image of the "good life" does not include a lifetime of servitude to reach some mythical "top," we move closer to sustainable growth. In our view, both the society and indeed the world would be the better for this.

In Conclusion

In this analysis we have purposely chosen to focus on new and promising developments in the conception and practices of aging. As survey research indicates, approximately 90% of the senior citizen population feels satisfied with their life, feel they have contributed positively to society, and claim to be in good health. However, our focus is nevertheless selective; not all sectors of the aging population are equally affected. There is enormous heterogeneity within the aging population (Dannefer, 1987), and there remain significant sectors of the population in which abject poverty, loneliness, and ill health prevail (Angel, 1997; Margolis, 1990). We scarcely wish to invite neglect for the afflicted. However, so vast has been the attention devoted to decline, that the image expands to color an entire phase of life. In certain respects this emphasis on decline may reflect the needs of those professions - scientific, medical, social service - that depend on "aging as a problem" to remain viable. To emphasize the positive would be to lose their *raison d'etre*. Again, in no way do we wish to suppress such concerns. Rather, our purpose here has been to keep the specter of deficit appropriately in check, to reflect appreciatively on the opportunities for new forms of aging, and to hasten the expansion of more promising possibilities of self-construction.

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