



Ways of Aging

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Positive Aging

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As the aging population expands, concern among scholars, policy planners, and ordinary people tends to focus on the decline and degeneration that seem inevitable with aging. A powerful theoretical framework stresses the importance of disengagement as the major outcome of the aging process (Cummings and Henry 1961). Almost no attention is paid to the years of potential growth and development that lie ahead for most people over 65. The negative focus is nicely illustrated in recent issues of the *Journal of Gerontology*, which featured the following topics: Alzheimer's disease, diabetes, hospitalized injuries, dementia, chronic rheumatology, chronic stress, balance impairment, antidepressants, depression, hypertension, muscle impairment, cerebrovascular disease, functional decline, and ulcers. Only a single article in the journal focused on the positive possibilities of aging. Such phrases as "over the hill," "out to pasture," and "the geriatric set" carry the negative image into everyday conversation.

In this chapter, we ask whether this vision is the best or the only way in which aging can be conceived? We think not! Taking an oppositional stand, we attend to the great benefits that aging can afford. We discuss how people are able to experience aging as an adventurous and fulfilling time, despite physical deterioration or other handicaps. We focus on the vast majority of elders who are not living below the poverty line (90 percent of older Americans live above it.), those who typically have some form of higher education and are able to enjoy a large variety of cultural resources. This focus is appropriate given that by the year 2010 the vast majority of those

over sixty will have had some college education and will be in better condition both economically and physically than in any preceding generation in history.

Thus, this chapter is about the not-too-distant futures of most readers. Our message is a hopeful one – that the last third of life need not be filled with despair at the loss of one's youth, but can be beautiful in its own right. We also stress that living positively is not just something for the rich, the strong, and the healthy, but is within the grasp of anyone, even those who might appear from some perspectives to be handicapped or ill (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Elsewhere we discuss various forms of systematic research relevant to positive aging (Gergen and Gergen 2000; in press). In the present chapter, we focus on individual cases that illustrate the many potentials for positive aging.

The Social Construction of Age

Before illustrating forms of positive aging, it will be helpful to understand more fully the conceptual context from which this work springs. Specifically, our work grows from a social constructionist standpoint. A key assumption of this perspective is that the ways in which we describe and explain the world are not demanded by the nature of the world itself. Rather, it is through the active negotiation and collaboration of people that such understandings are constructed. In effect, people in their social groups create their realities (K. Gergen 1999; M. Gergen 2001). Thus, there is no "one correct way" of describing the world, in science or elsewhere. Many constructions are possible, each with a utility for particular groups of people. In this sense, we are not bound by existing ways of describing and explaining the world; the creation of new possibilities depends on the character of our present dialogue. And, as we generate new ways of understanding, so do we open the door to new patterns of action.

With regard to the concept of aging, constructionist theses are particularly catalytic. They unsettle the 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, interests, desires, and so on over the life span (see Holstein and Gubrium 2000a). This tendency is strong in gerontological science, with its proclivity to chart various forms of physical and mental decline, as mentioned in the introduction above. With its strong emphasis on culturally and historically situated knowledge, social constructionism serves as a challenge to these efforts (Gubrium and Holstein 2000; Holstein and Gubrium 2000b). There is nothing about changes in the human body that require a concept of *aging* or of *decline*. There is no process of aging *in itself*; the discourse of

aging is born of interpersonal relationships within a given culture at a given time (Hazan 1994). Dancers in "gentlemen's clubs," Olympic gymnasts, and professional football players all become "old" at a rather young chronological age; most people classified as "old" within the culture at large feel quite young (Ronai 1992). The strong tendency to devalue the older person in Western culture can be contrasted with many traditional cultures in which the eldest are viewed as the wisest and treated with honor and respect.

In this same sense, we must also view the scientific literature of later-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, whether a given configuration constitutes "decline" – or, indeed, is worth mentioning at all – derives from a particular domain of values (such as productivity and individualism), along with various assumptions, vocabularies, measuring instruments, and the like (Gergen and Gergen in press). In effect, to find someone biologically or cognitively impaired constitutes what James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium (2000a) call a *collaborative accomplishment*. It is an accomplishment of particular professional groups, working with particular assumptions and values, within a complicit 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. In this sense, the narrative creates the life (Gergen and Gergen 1986; Sarbin 1986). When the story treats a phenomenon as "natural," it is often difficult to counteract (Tiefer 1995). The imagination is blunted, and the status quo remains firm.

When we avoid essentializing tendencies of naturalism, we become conscious of the possibilities of cultural transformation. If we emphasize the constructed nature of theories of aging, we become 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. Campioni 1997; Gergen 1996). We may begin to explore other, more uplifting, ways of understanding the latter years of life, and indeed launch discussions from which new visions emerge. We may seek out or initiate research that lends itself to an optimistic view of possibilities. We are invited to share stories and other resources that help us to realize these positive potentials in our own lives.

Varieties of Positive Aging

With this constructionist orientation in place, let us consider the various pathways by which older people today are creating lives that are full of meaning, joy, and satisfaction. Front porches are becoming obsolete and so

are "old folks" in their rocking chairs. With advances in wealth, health supports, political power and sheer numbers have come major shifts in life patterns of the elderly. Myriad opportunities have opened in numerous directions, and the new breed of the elderly are actively exploring them as indeed we write. There is no way we can capture the richness of these new developments in this concluding chapter. However, we do feel that several prominent life themes have become evident in recent decades, themes that are central to the positive aging process. Here, we identify three major life themes, the first centered on *the self*, the second on *interpersonal relationships*, and the third on *contributions to community*. Delineations among these themes are seldom clear, and many people will engage in all of these realms at one time or another. However, we do find that lives of the new elderly are often centered around one of these themes as opposed to the others.

The life theme centered on the self is one that is dedicated to self-enhancement in physical, psychological, and social ways. This focus might be called the "sybaritic life style." This lifestyle is dedicated to the pursuit of personal pleasure. The potentials for creating or maintaining a beautiful body, for expanding knowledge or self-awareness, for learning new skills or improving those already acquired, and for finding new ways to enhance one's sensual pleasures are the motivators for everyday life. One of the major avenues for the satisfaction of personal goals has been to create and maintain a level of personal attractiveness never before available to older people. With the use of plastic surgery, a medical specialty that has exploded in its popularity in recent years among men as well as among women, no one needs to be ugly. Face-lifts are now the operation of choice in many social groups, and as one very attractive professional woman in her fifties explained, "Among my friends, it is not IF you will get a face-lift, but WHEN." Actor Robert Redford in a recent interview had to defend his decision not to get plastic surgery by claiming that his wrinkles were the markings of his soul. Few other celebrities follow this philosophy, and the notion that one should look as good as one can physically is a demand that is prevalent in the aging population to the extent that it can be afforded. Bright, gleaming white teeth are now the standard for public personalities, and dentists specializing in cosmetic work are in high demand. Beauty does not stop with the head, however; a shapely, athletic body is also in vogue. Body work, itself, is a major new pastime for older people, as well as a new consumer offering for the purveyors of well-being. Spas, beauty ranches, gyms, yoga classes, and workout rooms in hotels, workplaces, and resorts all cater to the demands of the elder population. Lotions, vitamins, dietary supplements, and potions of all kinds are in demand to strengthen, enliven, and relax the body. Personal trainers and Eastern mystics, charged with enhancing spiritual tranquility and physical fitness, have gained popularity as well.

Self-development also includes educational programs, sports training schools, therapy and self-development workshops of all kinds. Pleasure seeking, through cruises, adventure holidays, singles clubs, parties and get-togethers all serve the self-seeker in the older years as well. Because older people now control vast economic resources, and account for approximately one-half of all discretionary spending, they have become a market that attracts a variety of purveyors of pleasure (Onks 2002). In these activities, older people represent a vision of retirement that attracts younger people who look forward to their turn in this stage of life.

The emphasis on interpersonal relationships can also be a common theme in the lives of older people. The important elements in the lives of these people usually revolve around maintaining and expanding the network of social relationships. Most frequently the network is an outwardly spiraling circle from intimate relationships with spouse and children to extended family members and then outward to neighbors, friends, and more distant acquaintances; for some, as in our example below, there may be many networks that are in motion all the time. For some, the creation and maintenance of networks of associates may be produced by continuing to be actively employed in the workforce. In recent years, more and more so-called retired people have reentered the workforce through part-time jobs. Although financial incentives have been created through changes in social security laws, people return to work for social as well as economic reasons. Having a place to be, to be recognized for your activities, and to have a social life among colleagues is highly valued by most people, and a job can be a means to continue to receive these benefits.

For many older people, the emphasis on the relationship itself is satisfied through family connections. The joy of life is in celebrating family occasions, of recognizing mutual advantages, and of sticking together in the hard times. Notions of solidarity and togetherness are the highest priorities, more meaningful than individual success and pleasure. Among those that value this lifestyle, there is less emphasis on having a big bank account. With family ties or close friendships, the rituals of togetherness may be very simple and inexpensive. Often differences in monetary wealth lead to pooling resources, such that one family member may have a boat, another a swimming pool, a third tickets to sporting events, and the "cousins" all share their advantages with one another. When one falls on hard times, the others help to stabilize the ones in difficulty, as Colleen Johnson and Barbara Barer's chapter in this volume illustrated. Accomplishments of individual members of the group shed a positive light on the rest; older people are included in the swirl of family and friendship connections, even their troubles, without the segregation that might be more typical of those involved in the sybaritic lifestyle.

The communally based lifestyle expands the involvement beyond the family/friendship networks, and may even be competitive with them.

People at younger ages who get involved in political activities in their local communities, in civic clubs, such as Rotary, the Lions Club, Chambers of Commerce, in their religious organizations, in educational institutions, or in charitable organizations, for example, often continue their commitments far into old age. Because they are reaching the end of their occupational lives, they are more available to serve these organizations in a voluntary capacity. More older people are engaged in voluntary activities in the U.S. today than any other age group. Thus, the elected officials and the board members of major community organizations are frequently the most senior in age. Through their vast experience, their long histories of involvement, and their availability, they become the leaders of their communities.

Often the demands of their offices or the extent of the communal need is so vast that the obligations of the voluntary commitment take on the proportions of a full-time job. For these people, there is often a sense of self-efficacy, pride, and fulfillment in these activities, but there is also the danger of feeling burned out when the problems of community life are too immense for the numbers that are addressing them, and of feeling unappreciated for work that is unpaid. The balance between feeling fulfilled and stressed is one that the communally oriented person of any age must constantly experience. For most older people, if the commitment is not overwhelming, communal service represents a golden opportunity to make a difference in the world. This sense of being useful and productive is satisfying at any age, but especially when other employment opportunities have ended.

The following sections amplify these themes and furnish brief illustrations of positive patterns of aging.

Personal Development: The Infinite Extension of the Self

Traditional cultural wisdom separates the life span into three parts: development, maturity, and decline. By common standards, the developmental phase is accelerated during the first six years of life, and gradually tapers until near closure by the late teens. With voting privileges and a driver's license, the individual *should* enter maturity! Yet, while not wishing a return to childhood, seekers of positive aging have largely abandoned the traditional view of developmental closure. For them, the end of employment and child rearing obligations offers freedom to continue their developmental process. As many feel, the obligations occupying them during the "middle years" often froze or impeded a process of development that should otherwise be open-ended. The old-fashioned meaning of the term "maturity" – associated with a conservative, toiling and unimaginative lifestyle – is no longer acceptable. Outfitted with both resources and time, there seem to be no limits to personal growth and fulfillment for the older person today.

This "return to personal development" is also supported by the individualist values central to the Western tradition since the 1600s. In this tradition, it is the individual (as opposed to the family or community) who serves as the fundamental atom of society. Strong value is placed on individual knowledge, morality, motivation, and responsibility. When these are well developed, it is believed, human relations will thrive, and society will function effectively. At the same time, the emphasis on the individual is linked to a Darwinian view of the survival of the fittest and a hedonistic vision of individual pleasure and pain. In the former instance, improving one's individual strengths and resources is to further one's survival, and in the latter the search for individual pleasure is viewed as a "natural" or biologically based proclivity. We mention these various threads of the individualist tradition because we find the life theme of personal development can take several different forms, depending on which aspect of the individualist tradition is emphasized. Let us consider, then, the way in which three different forms of personal development are played out: cultivating self-knowledge, building an empire, and pursuing pleasure.

Audrey Lermond: Cultivating the self

One vision of development long prominent within the upper classes (and particularly among women) is that of personal cultivation. In this case the dominant metaphor is that of the flower; the individual can be viewed as an emerging flower that requires cultivation in order to reach fruition. Cultivation requires continuous nurturing of the organism as a whole. Thus, the cultivated individual should not only possess wisdom, but sophistication and appreciation of art, literature, music, dance, the world's many languages and cultures, and more. The later years of Audrey Lermond nicely illustrate the continuing cultivation of the self.

Here we trace the last twenty-seven years in Audrey's life, in which she constantly expanded her knowledge, her talents and her skills from late maturity until her death at age 87. After five years of widowhood, Audrey was married for the second time at age 60 to a man who was 70, and they lived together until his death twenty years later. For many decades, Audrey had been intensively involved in various clubs and organizations that were primarily sponsored by the university where both her husbands had worked. One of the clubs was for wives of professors (going back to the days when educated women were married to professors, rather than serving as professors themselves). The Three Arts Club, as it was called, had a rotating series of lectures given by the members, and one of the lectures that Audrey prepared was on the life and work of Mary Cassatt, the American impressionist painter. Audrey spent almost a year preparing for her presentation, which subsequently earned her kudos from the group. Another

group she joined in her late 60s was dedicated to playing recorder music. She bought her first recorder at that time, and spent the next decade playing Renaissance music with a small ensemble. Audrey also attended church services regularly on Sundays, and participated in Bible study groups and women's circles up until her death.

For many years Audrey had heard about plans for a retirement village in an area near the university where she had once lived with her family. While her second husband was not eager to leave his vegetable gardens in the countryside, she insisted they sign up so they would be eligible to move when the facility opened. When he died shortly thereafter at age 90, Audrey was happy to know that she would be able to move into the livelier context offered by the retirement village. Another reason for leaving was that her house had been broken into once when she was out, and she had been robbed of some of her most valued pieces of jewelry, including her wedding ring from her first marriage. Now that she was alone, she no longer felt secure in the house. Driving was also becoming an increasing challenge, especially late at night, and she felt isolated and lonely without intellectual and social stimulation.

In the retirement village, Audrey chose a one-bedroom apartment, with a study, a dining/living space, kitchen, bath, and a tiny balcony, which overlooked the woods surrounding the buildings. She furnished it with antiques that had belonged to her mother, as well as more modern pieces she had acquired during her marriages. Her books filled her study shelves, her small art collection adorned the walls, and her elegant and copious wardrobe, including a mink jacket for which she had splurged on her 75th birthday, hung in the ample closet. Her crafts and collections created a homey and elegant atmosphere, and she would often entertain her bridge group in her apartment, continuing a tradition that she had upheld for 30 years with the same members.

Residents in the village were required to eat one meal a day in the formal dining room and had available to them a vast array of services, programs, classes, library and computer facilities, and other activities both on and off the grounds. The selection of available activities bedazzled Audrey, and in the seven years she lived in this apartment she participated in many of them. Among the highlights were joining a dance group that eventually performed in a ballet with children from a local school. She regaled her friends with stories of what it was like to dance on a stage with little boys who were not always so attentive to the music or the choreography.

Perhaps the greatest pleasure she found in the last two years of her life was yoga class. She was fond of the teacher and felt the exercise was very beneficial to her heart and lungs, as well as for her flexibility and stamina. She had twice suffered bouts of lung cancer in her earlier years, and it had impaired her ability to breathe easily when exerting herself. Living in this community also stimulated her interest in travel. She had done little travel-

ing before the age of 60. In her elder years, however, she not only visited her four adult children, now spread across the country, but traveled as well to the Holy Lands, Greece, Italy, France, and England. Her last trip, taken as a member of an Elderhostel group, was to Russia, a year before she died. Her trips not only were opportunities for her to expand her knowledge of the world, but they also stimulated months of prior research so that she would be prepared to take advantage of all her experiences. None of her family could match her thirst for knowledge, one that time could never quench.

Audrey Lermond never let go of the developmental vision. The image of "aging as decline" played little role in her life. Rather, she continued to believe that stored within the traditions of the world were untold riches, and that the opportunity to grow through these treasures terminated only with death. And, with this belief in the forefront, indeed Audrey's life remained enchanted until its end.

Sandy Lewis: Power at play

The infinite extension of the self takes many forms. Particularly within the competitive tradition of masculinity, one's self-esteem may depend on accumulation of wealth. In this sense, the availability of unencumbered time provided by retirement functions much like an untethering. The male springs free to play the Darwinian survival game more fully, and the stakes are frequently those of power, prestige, and property. This theme is most apparent in the lifestyle adopted by Sandy Lewis.

Sandy Lewis, like many sons of self-made men, has spent his life comparing himself to his father. For him, one of the most significant achievements in life is to measure up to a father's success. Even better, according to Sandy's philosophy, is to do better than one's dad. At the same time, Sandy developed other interests and values; he came to believe strongly in a solid family life, and had the distinct pleasure of marrying a woman with whom he could share his ambitions. Together they parented two sons to carry on the family traditions. As a youth, Sandy was never very interested in intellectual activities, and college for him was a place for playing sports, having a good time, and making connections. From the time he entered high school, what interested him most was how to make a great deal of money. He settled on a strategy of learning as much about the business world as he possibly could and by making himself indispensable to the boss whenever possible.

After he left college, Sandy devoted himself to empire building. His long hours of work, hands-on dealings, charming social style, and creative and risky decisions ultimately paid off. With the help of his very involved and intelligent wife, he created a plan by which he could amass a considerable fortune and be able to leave the daily grind by age 55. Having had his

children as a young man, they were on their own, making their fortunes, and he and his wife were able to travel extensively, buy a dream home in Arizona, and take up golf.

Although the day-to-day management of business operations was over for Sandy, the itch to be making deals never lets up. Retirement has become a time for enhancing his opportunities to engage in entrepreneurial activities. In Arizona, he has met a new group of men who have also taken early retirement, but are still active and engaged in business, via the phone, the Internet, and in face-to-face meetings. Mornings do not go by but that Sandy is on the telephone with his broker, his partners in various business deals, his accountant, or his lawyer. The pace of his business life only slackens when he is out playing golf, tending to his gardens, or having dinner with his wife. Even on the golf course, talk of money, tax laws, capital gains, and the price of commodities is ever present. Every hole is a chance to gamble, and the adrenaline is always pumped by interactions with other men. At times, Sandy is overwhelmed by the wealth of various business partners and friends in his new world, and he feels humble and a bit low on the food chain among the people he calls the "high rollers." But, his happy family life, his pride in his sons, his religious faith, and patriotic virtue keep him feeling balanced and secure.

For Sandy Lewis, then, retirement was not a loss of power. It was indeed the opportunity for the free expansion of entrepreneurial interests. Is there an end in sight, a point when Sandy will be content to settle down? We expect not, primarily because the joy for Sandy is not in sedentary activities, but in "playing the game."

Julie and Carl Brown: The pursuit of pleasure

The hedonistic view of the self – a being primarily devoted to maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain – has played a prominent role in the individualist tradition. Yet, in the workday world of "mature adulthood," one's job is typically seen as antagonistic to one's natural urges for pleasure, leading to the common distinction between "work" and "play." The result is that for many retirement from the world of work opens the door to "natural," hedonistic being. The primary aim of life becomes that of maximizing pleasure. The lifestyle of Julie and Carl Brown demonstrates this ideology in action.

Carl met Julie when she was going through nurse's training and he was a cadet at West Point. Each of them had exceeded the expectations of their families, who had dreams for their children of a college education that they themselves never had. The path that stretched between the first days of their marriage to retirement was often tedious, frightening, and long. In their first years of marriage, they lived meagerly on an army base in Germany. During the Vietnam war, Julie lived with her in-laws and their

tiny baby while Carl served in a helicopter rescue squad in Vietnam. For many years, Carl devoted himself to working for a large stockbroker firm. Later he was transferred to Wall Street, and for five tension-filled days each week he wrestled with the bulls and the bears. Frequently, the evenings were occupied as well with entertaining wealthy customers. On weekends he returned home to his wife and children for repair of mind, body, and spirit.

Carl promised himself that as soon as he could arrange it, he was going to retire from the rat race and make a new life. The motto of this new life was to be "enjoy every minute to the fullest." When the stock market flew up the register, Carl abandoned New York. The nest was empty, and he and Julie decided to move to a resort area in Colorado. There they found an elegant community, designed around skiing, golf, and party time. Carl was 57 and Julie was 55. Handsome, outgoing, happy-go-lucky, healthy, athletic, and open to every indulgence, they were welcomed into the community with open arms. They treated themselves to golf lessons at a luxurious resort, bought skis for all snow conditions, purchased a satellite dish for maximum film and musical enjoyment, and explored the finest restaurants in the area. They played tennis indoors and out, and Julie's charming and cheery personality, along with her wicked forehand shots, won over even the most competitive players.

Travel became an important part of their lifestyle. In the summer, they might spend some days on Martha's Vineyard with old Boston friends, and a weekend on Long Island with acquaintances from New York. Sybaritic friends in Florida host them on the Gulf side, where they jog, play tennis, and drink Margeritas on the deck. (Julie never leaves home without her own thermos of Margeritas.) Carl and Julie are now members of the "Go Fifty" club, a group that requires members to be at least fifty years old. The monthly meetings usually involve hiking, picnics, outings, and travels. Often the meetings end up with a dinner at some cozy gourmet hideaway in the mountains. Carl is the informal group DJ; he always brings his own box of CDs to any gathering, and he controls the tunes. He creates the mood with labels such as "Bump and Grind," "Sexy and Slow," or "Rock'm Sock'm." Julie's expressive dancing matches the moods he creates. Since moving West, they have also been introduced to spas, massages, and other herbal treatments that are fashionable with this set. Their new home has a Jacuzzi, which is populated on the weekends by houseguests and visitors. Piling into the tub, in tribute to Mother Nature, they pop the champagne and toast the beauty of the moonlit mountains.

The pleasure-seeking style of aging evidenced by Carl and Julie is found primarily in the resort areas of the country. Further, such pursuits seem to thrive on the availability of others. However, this does not mean that wealth is essential to the pursuit of pleasure. Many pleasures are far less expensive than those enjoyed by Carl and Julie. Activities such as fishing, cooking,

camping, movies, and just "hanging out with friends," are major sources of pleasure for many.

The Return to Relationship

A prevailing vision of individual development in the West is that of emerging independence. That is, while activities with family and friends are important in the early years, the ultimate hallmark of maturity is personal autonomy. In this sense, emotional dependencies are a detriment to the fully functioning adult. Feminist scholars (see, for example, Chodorow 1978) point out that it is the male child who is placed under the most severe pressures to become independent. And, indeed, there is a long-standing distinction in the sociology of the family between what are called the *instrumental* and *socio-emotional* roles.

The instrumental role is filled by the individual who can work in independence of the family to earn wages (traditionally the male), while the socio-emotional role falls to the individual who nurtures and sustains emotional dependencies within the family (the stereotypic female). As recent decades of feminist theory have discredited the division of roles (in which the woman is seen as non-instrumental) and two-career families have become the norm, instrumentality has become a dominant theme for the middle years of life of both women and men (Hochschild 1989). With retirement, however, the structure of life is redefined. For many, the domain of relationships looms as the long-neglected or uncompleted challenge. One is free again to return to the joys of emotional interdependence. The life of Lauren and Tom illustrate the way in which relationship becomes the dominant theme for many in the later years.

Lauren and Tom: Life as the art of loving

In the 1970s, Lauren expressed the deep yearning that Betty Friedan (1963) called the "problem without a name." For Lauren, it was the desire to establish herself as a professional artist. After much soul-searching, she separated from her husband and left the suburbs, her comfortable home, and her two children to pursue her career in the city. Her husband, who had some understanding of the depths of his wife's despair at living the closeted, suburban life, took care of the children for many years and helped financially to support her quest for "self actualization." Over time, the couple divorced and the stipend was terminated. In their high school years, Lauren's children came to live with her in her small loft apartment, in which she carved spaces adequate for tiny bedrooms for her daughter, son, and herself. She continued to struggle daily to make ends meet and to develop her artistic career.

From the time she was thirty until she was in her mid-fifties, Lauren lived a life that was full of creative ingenuity and self-sufficiency. Yet, despite some occasional art shows and sales, she could not support herself as an artist. Her aesthetic theme, mostly the female nude expressed in large oil canvases, was too daring for most local collectors, and they did not sell. Finally, Lauren was on the verge of abandoning her dream of becoming a full-time artist when an angel stopped at her doorstep. A wealthy collector fell in love with her and her work, and declared his willingness to promote her at all costs. She had opportunities to work and to show unlike any she had had before. Over time, however, the gild on the lily of their romance chipped away, and they separated acrimoniously. All she retained were her paintings, and the expensive clothes and gifts he had given her. She seemed destined to live alone, unable to sustain a relationship and struggling to make ends meet.

Soon after her sixtieth birthday, she met Tom, a man who was quite the opposite of her former husband, her previous lover, and herself. He was a retired accountant, widowed, with a large family of children and grandchildren to whom he was devoted. His major hobby was collecting ships in bottles, and he did this with a passion. As much as she was creative, sensitive, moody and intellectual, he was solid, stable, and sensible. While she was the charismatic butterfly at the center of attention, he was the quiet one, at the periphery of the crowd. None of her friends gave this new beau much of a chance among the artistic crowd in which Lauren was known.

Yet, over time, the significance of the relationship became increasingly clear. Tom was there to appreciate her work, to help her hang her shows, to fix her a cup of tea when she had worked herself to the bone. He planned and took care of things when she was overwhelmed. He offered a shoulder to cry on. He went with her to every concert, art opening, theatre production or poetry reading she could arrange, and he tried to be interested. He looked at her adoringly across the crowded room. After all the years of struggle and loneliness, at age 64 she finally found herself deeply in love; she cried for joy when Tom proposed. During the wedding ceremony, which they created for themselves, she said she felt truly cherished for the first time in her life. They held a reception in their beautiful new artist's loft, where their extended families and friends toasted the new bride and groom. Since that time they have created a life that is centered in each other. They face the seventh decade of their lives as a beginning, not an ending.

Lauren and Tom find that their elderly years do not signal the end of romance and intimacy, but indeed a unique opportunity for exploration. As each will admit, in terms of loving relationships, "they never had it so good." Their route through aging is precarious; when one's major nourishment is drawn from an intimate relationship, the loss of the other can be devastating. However, judging from discussions with Lauren and Tom, life

is now richly robust, and if tragedy comes there will be other resources available, including treasured memories of the times they have shared.

T. G. Larson: Master networker

For many people in the later years, the sphere of relationships is continuously diminishing. Theories of disengagement suggest that this is the normal pattern of life for people as they retire. The word "disengagement" itself suggests a withdrawal from active life. At the same time, other theorists argue that social involvement is the key to a satisfying old age (Bengtson and Schaie 1999). Much research seems to support the view that being active is important to a long and healthy life (Gergen and Gergen in press). In effect, there is much to be said for actively avoiding forces of disengagement. As people die or move away, steps should be taken to sustain a circle of active relationships. Such steps are much easier to take than heretofore, not only because of the increased wealth and health of the elderly population, but as well because of advances in computer communication and air travel. We bring attention here to an individual who thrives on human connection. In sustaining active communication across the land, he finds stimulation and joy, and a continuous source of creative inspiration.

Now in his late seventies, T. G. Larson is a master networker. He is well prepared for his role, as he spent his adult life in the communications industry. His most creative endeavors were the origination of two prominent national magazines. Through his capacities to communicate across a wide spectrum, he located investors, enlisted collaborators, hired innovative staff members, and scoured the country in search of interesting writers. So successful was one of the magazines that it spawned a publishing company and an educational film initiative. After creating a magazine and its associated businesses, T. G. would move on to new ventures. The thrill for him was in bringing forth from the well-spring of human connection new and worthy institutions. Self-interest seemed but a peripheral concern for T. G., and, because of the trust he established, many people were pleased to join with him.

In his early seventies, T. G. became particularly interested in the connection between health and spirituality, and developed dialogue with professors of divinity schools, active clergy from diverse denominations, media gurus, public opinion leaders, scientists, publications experts, philosophers, and psychologists in what became a synergistic matrix of creation. His hopes in the energy of positive human connection finally bore fruit. A new magazine was created with many of the dialogic participants serving on the board. T. G. himself did not take on the editorship of the magazine. The potentials of human connection seemed infinite. So, with further conversations in motion, he helped to create a massive Web resource, where issues in

spirituality and human well-being could be deliberated. It is doubtful that this endeavor will serve as the culmination of T. G.'s efforts. For those who know him, one can anticipate phone calls, e-mail messages or a fax from T. G. at any time of day or night – perhaps brief, but containing an idea he thinks might be of interest or urging a connection with another friend who is "on your wave length." T. G. derives enormous satisfaction in life from breeding the conditions where trusted people of good will are able to make something happen, something of value to the world more generally.

As the world context changes, so do the prevailing forms of aging. In many respects T. G. Larson represents a cutting-edge style of life among the elderly. It is a lifestyle given birth by the explosion in communication technology. The availability of computers, cell phones, faxes, and air transportation means that the relational matrix can endlessly expand. In this sense T. G. may be in the vanguard of a life form of major magnitude.

Communal Contribution: Transcending the Self

Thus far, we have placed a strong emphasis on the individualist tradition, and the way in which it plays out in various themes of positive aging. We have seen how this tradition fosters a variety of later life patterns centered around self-development. We have also explored how many people find later life an opportunity to shuck the individualist demands for autonomy in favor of bonding relationships. There is a third, highly important outgrowth of the individualist tradition that may be viewed as ethical in character. To elaborate, we have seen how the individualist tradition concentrates on developing, empowering, and rewarding the self, creating a condition in which others are secondary or unimportant. If "I look out for Number One," then others are relegated to lesser positions of significance. Religious leaders, ethicists, and social thinkers have long decried this condition, and have, as a result, placed a primary emphasis on dedication, devotion, and sacrifice to others. To put it succinctly, if it were not for the strength of the individualist tradition, the religious admonition to "love thy neighbor as thyself" would be unnecessary. We must be reminded in myriad ways to give to others, and when we do we can enjoy a deep sense of worth. In fact, society grants its highest awards to those who sacrifice their lives for the greater communal good.

Many people find that because of the demands of work and family that dominate adult life, they do very little to help others outside their immediate family circles. There may often be an abiding sense of guilt that one's life is so self-centered. With retirement, the door is again open to reconstitute life. And for many, there is great joy to be derived from now dedicating time and energy to making a better world for all. Here we furnish a glimpse

into two elderly lives in which the theme of communal contribution came to play a major role.

Gerry Ramon: One is never too old to count

Gerry Ramon is a widow who retired from teaching at age 65. She describes herself as a Luddite, one who is resistant to technological "advances," including computers. She does not own a television, a clothes dryer, or a microwave. She gets her exercise hanging out her clothes to dry, and she picks vegetables and fruits from her own gardens. Her one important concession to the late twenty-first century is an answering machine her son installed when he was looking for a job. She is quite adamant about her preferences for simplicity, and she sees it as a part of her Quaker heritage and style of life. Her religious community of Friends, which has been a part of her life since she was a girl, sustains her in unseen ways. Part of her vigor and sense of direction seems to originate in the sense of the spirit within her that is fulfilled through her service to the community.

Fulfillment through community service ultimately became life-saving for Gerry. Her husband died at retirement, and grief at this loss persisted for another ten years. Relief from the process of grieving only began as Gerry became involved in community affairs. One of her most noteworthy endeavors, and one from which she derives the greatest reward, involves work with prisoners. As a member of the Prison Society, Gerry became an official visitor of prisons. Her duties include talking to inmates about their lives and the prison conditions. She helps the inmates with their medical problems, gives them advice about various complaints, locates legal support for them, and often writes letters to prison or governmental officials about the treatment of prisoners. On occasion, Gerry has testified at parole hearings and state hearings on the treatment of prisoners. She also attends conferences related to prison reform and mentors others who wish to continue her work. When she is not doing prison work, she is also involved in volunteering at a homeless shelter. She serves food, organizes the kitchen, and brings in spare blankets, clothes, and other items useful to the poor.

Recently, Gerry was asked by her local school to substitute teach. A key teacher was ill, and the school was desperate. Gerry agreed and found the work very rewarding. She enjoyed the camaraderie and action provided by the staff and the students, even though it was a substantial addition to her already full days. She has had to cut back on some of her volunteer work to make time for grading homework and other preparations at school. She is a stickler for excellent grammar and usage, and adheres to some rather old-fashioned ideas of how students should perform.

Gerry is also an active alumnus of her college, and belongs to a book club sponsored by the school. Part of her pleasure in this membership is that professors from the English department occasionally give lectures to the

group. She loves to discuss the books and to create some intellectual ferment at these gatherings. Sometimes she worries that she expresses herself too forcefully and that this habit may annoy some of the other members. She is quite opinionated and knows a great deal of literary history. She is extending her willingness to help others to those in the group who have no transportation, and she has become actively involved in helping them "sort out" their lives in a variety of ways.

In the college years, one of the most frequently voiced aims in life is "to help other people." Yet, seldom is adult life devoted to such ends. In Gerry Ramon's case, the elderly years offered the long-sought opportunity to put her life to use for the greater good. Scholars have recently sounded an alarm regarding the decline of civic participation in the United States (see, for example, Putnam 1995). In the coming expansion of the population over age 60, we may hope to find a reversal of this trend. The elderly population may be the needed glue to hold communities in place.

Lyle Gifford: Creating for the community

There are many ways of serving the broader community of humankind, and one of them is to add to the storehouse of cultural riches. Contrary to the widespread belief that creativity diminishes with age, and that most great cultural achievements are completed by people in their early adulthood, many of the greatest cultural achievements in the Western world have been generated by individuals working into their nineties (Simonton 2000). As many attest, it is engagement in this creative work that is the wellspring of their continued zest for life.

Lyle Gifford was well prepared for an old age devoted to creative activity. His life was always devoted to music – as a cathedral chorister, organ scholar, cathedral organist, and as a college professor. Born in Gloucester, England, he is still actively involved with music at age 90. Lyle's first attempt at retirement occurred at age 65. However, for the next fifteen years he continued to teach college part-time and served as an organist and choir director at a nearby church. At age, 80 he elected to retire completely from academic life, and took up residence in a retirement community in the Southwest.

Lyle has scarcely retired. He spends many hours a day with his music, primarily composing. Lyle has also discovered the advantages of using the computer for composing – printing, playing, and editing his music. His output increased vastly since he acquired the first useful computer program in 1986. In addition to composing, Lyle is also in demand to conduct performances of his works and he continues playing the organ. In his late 80s, he conducted a large performance of a piece he had written for chorus and saxophone quartet. Later, he accompanied his daughter in a recital in Clare Hall, Cambridge University, England; she sang ten of his songs.

Perhaps a crowning achievement was to attend a performance in a British cathedral of a festival anthem he was commissioned to compose for the occasion. In his "spare" time, Lyle plays the organ for a community-based orchestra, and conducts chorus and symphony for a state orchestra.

Lyle is convinced that his musical creativity plays an important role in his current well-being. "To get out of bed eager to get back to the computer to continue work on a composition, and then to experience the pleasure when it all works out (especially now that one can hear the results immediately via the synthesizer and stereo without having to wait for a group of players to perform it as formerly was the case) is heady stuff indeed." This means there is little time left for physical exercise. He does eat dinner regularly with a small group of residents who have formed a family-like relationship; with no plans to remarry, he still enjoys the warm friendship of women in the group. As he admits, however, his greatest source of support and inspiration comes from the love of his extended family, who make an essential contribution to his happy state of mind.

It would be a mistake to suppose that Lyle Gifford's form of aging is highly common. There are all too few who have the training, creative imagination, and confidence to create works of such significance. At the same time, many initiatives are now emerging devoted to nourishing the creative spirit in communities of the elderly – in painting, drama, musical performance, life history writing, and more. As reasoned in this case, the value of such work does not lie in the size of the audience, nor does bringing joy to others require a lifetime of training. The pleasure derived from creating for the community is available to all.

Resources and Positive Aging

Many gerontologists and other scholars have been enthusiastic about the possibilities of creating narratives of positive aging. This is not so surprising given that a very stable research finding asserts that happiness is positively correlated with age (Argyle 1999). Yet others remain skeptical of such aims, and claim that positive aging is out of reach for most Americans. They believe that in order to have a happy and thriving old age, one must have two critical resources – wealth and health.

We reject this notion; happiness and tranquility can neither be bought by wealth nor sealed by health at any age. As many sociologists before us have noted, the relationship between happiness and accumulated wealth is very weak (Myers 1993). While wealthier people tend to be satisfied with their lives, so are poorer people. Wealth does not in itself create happiness, although it is true that extreme poverty can be detrimental to feelings of well-being (Argyle 1999). Whether good health is essential to positive aging is also questionable.

First, the meaning of "good health" is negotiable. If people are prone to the common cold, losing their hearing, or suffering arthritis, are they in good or poor health? These are matters of conflicting opinion. Of special importance, people who live in communities of the elderly develop their own standards of what counts as "poor health," and these standards differ considerably from those shared by young adults. Second, whether people use their bodily condition to judge their well-being is also variable (Friedrick and Lowerstein 1999). Many who are blind, deaf, or crippled, for example, don't evaluate their well-being in terms of these "less than perfect" bodies. They are simply irrelevant to what counts most. In contrast, many younger people who are overweight, possess a small chin or have a large nose, may be miserable. Bodily condition itself is not as important as how it is constructed.

From a constructionist perspective, what is required for a positive aging experience is primarily a repertoire of resources for creating positive meanings. If the social order is pressuring one to give up on life and one's desires as one ages, it is imperative that one not only possess resources to resist this pull but to create meaningful alternatives. Higher education may make an important contribution to such resources. Educational experience may be less important in "stamping in knowledge" than in opening avenues of interest and value.

There are many resources other than education that can be significant, including, for example, good parental role models, family members and friends who are "young at heart" despite age and infirmity, models of positive aging in public life and entertainment spheres, a community that invites a certain level of activity and participation, or a deeply developed interest in the surrounding world. To conclude our profiles, we describe Sam Watson, a local gardener/handyman, who has not had higher education, who has lived alone for many years, but who has a great love and knowledge of nature born of long years in the out of doors.

Sam Watson: Retired handyman and gardener

Sam Watson worked on the buildings and grounds crew of a local college for most of his adult life. He came to the college sometime after World War II. Sam had been wounded while serving in the Pacific – a severe leg injury – and had chronically poor vision. Nevertheless, he worked on the college grounds until he retired at age 70. At the college, Sam acquired a deep knowledge of plant life, soil, drainage systems, and the means of creating beauty in nature. Over time, he became an expert in transforming the campus into a garden of Eden. Financial support from the local factory to the college helped to expand on the possibilities for plantings and gardens, and Sam was right there, making sure each plant had a good home in which to flourish. Sam had barely a high school education, so when the college

upgraded their horticultural office, they hired professionals. However, it didn't take long for the smarter ones to learn that Sam spoke to the trees and bushes, and coaxed even the most difficult plants to bloom. He became well known in the community for his skills as a gardener.

Sam's pension was sufficient to live on, but physical retirement was far from his mind. Sam thus started his "second career" by offering his services to a variety of homeowners he had met when working at the college. Word of mouth quickly spread and soon he found himself working for friends of friends. As his commitments mounted, so did the demands for his services. Soon, Sam found that he could select the properties that were interesting to him or that offered new opportunities to see nature flourish. The money was of secondary importance.

Sam had been married and had one son. His wife had died when she was in her forties, and he had never found the right woman to remarry. His son had gone away to college, and while they had a comfortable relationship, they were not often together, except on holidays, when Sam would go into the city to visit his son. Later, when his son married and had a child, Sam became interested in visiting for Sunday dinners. Sam enjoyed being a grandfather, and when his grandson was 6 years old, Sam began taking him out to learn about the countryside. Sam showed him the secrets he knew about plants and animals, and the relationship with the little boy was the closest and most pleasing human contact Sam had.

Sam's other loyal companion was a black dog, a mix of Labrador and Golden Retriever, who went everywhere with Sam in his truck. There was a deep, loving bond between the two, and Big Ben gave Sam a sense of company that served him well. They lived in a small cottage on the edge of the county park. Sam kept the house in top condition, surrounding it with plants and bushes, both native and exotic, which attracted nearby garden clubs for tours. He enjoyed taking the visitors around, explaining how his gardens grew. Often, one or two would invite him for tea, to show off their gardens in return, and perhaps to attract the eye of this gentle man. This attraction to Sam was not so surprising. The years of working outdoors and his natural proclivities had helped to shape Sam into a "Gary Cooper" looking man – tall, slim, with a tanned and deeply etched face, and a ready smile that highlighted his healthy white teeth. He always seemed rather unaware of his looks and his interest in socializing never lasted very long; soon he yearned to get back to his dog, his garden, and his work.

As Sam's late-life trajectory demonstrates, wealth, physical condition, and higher education are not essential to positive engagement. Sam's life experiences have provided him with substantial resources – a love of nature and a know-how for creating beauty. These provide a solid basis for a meaningful and fulfilling older age.

Conclusion

Each of these stories has described people who have found a way of aging that is full of vigor, interest, and challenges of all varieties. They exemplify what we wish to call "positive aging." These people are not focused on the inevitability of their deaths and potential declines. They are not taking to heart the acclamation of one of our young colleagues, who said to us, "Face it, everyone over the age of 60 is a patient." The themes that pervade these particular lives are all related to the dominant traditions of Western culture. These traditions encourage the individual who leaves the world of work to move in one of several directions.

In this chapter, we have emphasized movements toward self-fulfillment, emotional interdependence, and communal contribution. If we were to extend our review, we would also emphasize the spiritual, meditative, and contemplative traditions from which many draw nurturance as they grow older. It is also important to realize that participation in any of these trajectories may carry with it a unique pleasure. It is a pleasure that grows from an intensified consciousness of the preciousness of life, of time, and other human beings.

Sensing that one is reaching an ending creates new conditions of thoughtfulness, reflection, memory, and desire that are inaccessible to those oblivious to the passage of time. This new sensitivity can add an enriching dimension to the meaning of one's life. The people we have described are not without their trials and tribulations, nor without their fears and frailties, but they also illustrate the point of the familiar saying, "Living well is the best revenge."

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