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MLO 10/10

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IN THE SECOND HALF OF LIFE

by

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The Twentieth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences
Seoul, Korea August 21-26, 1995

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The Longevity Factor: Implications for Human Potential in the Second Half of Life

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The second half-century of human life will soon be big news. A major transition is about to take place: on January 1, 1996, the first Baby Boomers begin to turn fifty. Every January 1 thereafter for 18 years, another year of Boomers will start crossing the half-century mark: 76 million plus in all, almost exactly the size of our entire population in 1900: a miniature nation within a nation.

Add them to the millions of Americans who have already passed fifty, and we have a truly unprecedented event: a group in the second half-century of life that is larger than the entire American population throughout most of our history.

In our era, the second fifty years have not been accorded much honor. In 1900 50 was the age at which elderhood truly took hold, the point of no return. All of us have been affected by the disdain which 50 inspired. It is easy to see our disregard for the older years of life as a product of the youth craze of the 1960's, when the maxim became "Don't Trust Anybody Over 30." In reality, the roots of American ageism are much longer than that. They extend back into the 19th century with the same girth and vigor that they have now. We come by our prejudices honestly: our ancestors had them too, and theirs were worse.

It is only fairly recently that we have begun to see that "old" can mean different things in different eras. In fact, despite its apparent physiological base, the timing of "old age" is as elastic as any other part of human culture. Old is an

adjective that is not firmly attached to any specific chronological age in human life. As evidence of this we have the astonishing rise of the threshold of "old age" during this century - even within the memory of some people who are still alive today. At 30 the Countess in the circa-1900 operetta "Der Rosenkavalier" says she is "ready to take her place among the elders." In 1906, Sir Frederick Osler remarked that, "everybody knows the partial uselessness of a man past 40;" at 35 years of age in the 1940's, one woman in The Long Careers Study was refused a room at the YWCA because she was "an older woman." No explanation was given as to why "older women" were bad company for the other female residents of the YWCA, but the staff member's accents of disapproval still lingered in the mind and heart of the woman herself.

These examples need a gender-based footnote. During the 20th century, "old age" has always been assumed to come earlier for women than for men. If the Countess was "old" at 30, then her male counterpart would have been "old" at 40 (as in Osler's speech.) There seem also to be gradations of oldness: it is a kind of two-step process, as in Bernice Neugarten's terminology: "young-old" and "old-old." In 1900, the impression I have received from interviewees is that if 40 is the age when men became "young-old," 50 was the age at which they became "old-old" -- although there may have been some individual variations based upon physical condition as is true today.

In any case, my point is this: by the standards of previous eras, all of us at this conference are old persons, and some of us are veritable miracles of antiquity. By the standards of a conference 95 years from now in the future, we may all still be classified as young.

The Longer Lifetime

During the past 95 years, we have added almost 30 years to average life expectancy in the U.S. We have doubled the length of adulthood in less than one

century - something else that has never occurred before in human history. And though average life expectancy is a statistical artifact unrelated to any individual life, in fact more and more of us are living into the later years of life in good physical condition and with the vigor expected of much younger people a century ago.

Moreover, as longevity has increased, the point at which people become physiologically old has been increasingly delayed, so that the 30 years added to adulthood has been added to middle age, not to old age -- a "second" middle age.

One of the most interesting aspects of this transformation is that we did not deliberately create it. In fact, we still don't really know exactly how it happened. Moreover, we have achieved this extraordinary result in a society whose production of environmental toxins is truly staggering, and whose pace of change is enough to break down any organism's health from stress.

This unexpected and unintended achievement has radically altered the adult life course for most Americans. And it has transformed the meaning of the age of 50, for us and for every long-lived generation in the future.

The improved research that has accompanied this development has shown that our former beliefs about aging were distorted and inaccurate. Most of the negative aspects of aging which were such a damning part of its image seem to be due not to aging itself but to illness, malnutrition, or disuse. Mental deterioration, memory loss, immune system vulnerability, muscle weakness, and bone fragility, all can be attributed to specific physical causes. In fact, the traditional "downhill slide" - cumulative decline - is not a necessary part of aging. There are some people who survive into their 100's, as Dr. James E. Birren has noted, without any physical disability, and who die of no particular observable cause -- truly of "natural causes."

Even creativity turns out to be a life-long personality trait, not an elixir that evaporates along with the heady perfume of youth. The most surprising single result of my study of the lives of 150 Americans between 65 and 102, the Long Careers Study (1987-1992) was that the participants' periods of highest creativity occurred far later in the life course than they were supposed to.

Almost half the study participants began their period of greatest creativity and productivity around the age of 50. An additional percentage were already in a creative upswing at 50.

Moreover, about 6% of the study participants -- nine people -- began their most creative period even later in life -- at 65 or after. These included both famous older achievers like Maggie Kuhn and the redoubtable Dr. W. Edwards Deming, and less-famous examples like Samuel Sadin (founder of the Brookdale Law Institute) and Elizabeth Burns, an insurance clerk into her late 80's, who has just made her first real career change at 90 to work for a television network!

Tracking the life and career histories of so many people who did not do things the way they were "supposed to" -- that is, in the sequence our society expected -- gave me the opportunity to reflect at length on the nature of the adult life course.

I would like to propose for our consideration here three hypotheses that emerged from this process.

First, the drive for learning and growth persists throughout the life span, regardless of how long the life span is. It is a biological drive that expresses in some way as long as the person is alive, barring exceptional states like serious illness. It is not a function of youth but rather an integral function of life itself.

Secondly, the pattern of the adult developmental sequence depends upon the generalized average life expectancy in the society in question. I believe that the unconscious mind shapes an adult's developmental sequence based on how much time it knows is likely to be available (again, barring accidents). As a result, in societies with life spans of differing lengths, the periods of highest creativity would come at different ages.

Third, there are individual variations in the spacing and patterning of creative periods. Some people seem to become highly creative very early in life; others develop their greatest creativity late in life. There are early achievers, late achievers, mid-life achievers, and life-long achievers. We do not know the reason for these individual variations, but they clearly exist, and we must accept them as normal differences, without tagging them as superior or inferior.

In a society in which the average length of adult life is about 30 years, starting at age 20 and extending roughly to age 50 but not much farther, we have already observed that the period of greatest creativity for many individuals falls somewhere between 30 and 45. This is the period that was taken as invariable by Harvey Lehman, author of *Age and Achievement* (1953) and which has long been held up as the ideal in the United States.

When the average length of adult life is twice as long - 60 years, 20 to 80 - it appears that for the majority of individuals the most important creative peak may be postponed to the period between 50 and 80.

We are seeing now, in the United States, the results of such a shift in a society which previously had regarded the ages both of creativity and elderhood as invariable. A lifetime in which 50 to 80 is the most creative period is seriously out of synchronization with our present view of adult life, which is that you begin to slow down at age 50 and enter old age and retirement at 65/[70].

The original justification for retirement at the age of 65 was the fact that most people did not live long past that age, and that those who did reach 65 were likely to be worn out and ill. If you are ill or tired, "retirement" sounds like a great idea. If, however, you are a healthy adult with a normal energy supply, then the idea of doing nothing quickly begins to pall. Use it or lose it, the saying goes. From the point of physical health, staying active is a form of both life and health insurance.

If employees are early-retired at around 50, it means that companies may be losing the most productive years of the employee's life cycle. It also means that some employees may have their period of highest creativity cut short or derailed because their environment will be so changed by leaving the company that they will not have an appropriate setting in which to use what they know. Several of the people in the Long Careers Study had this experience, and it is clear that work settings are not all reproducible. For some people, there is no setting that is as useful as their primary job environment. The higher the level of expertise, and the rarer the person's skills, the more likely this is to be true.

Others will be able to use the energy of this period of creative growth to make a major career change, shifting, for example, from running an office supply business to becoming a stockbroker, from being a minister to being a career counselor, or from being a bank executive to being a restaurateur.

There will be variations in this general pattern when applied to any group of individuals. There will probably still be some individuals who will have a major creative period between 30 and 45, even in a long-lived society. Nevertheless, it appears that a majority will experience a rise in creative growth at about the age of 50, and that growth curve is capable of continuing to rise in a sustained fashion for at least three decades.

There will also be some whose creative peak comes even later. The presence in the Long Careers Study group of a small cluster of post-65 late achievers - 9 persons, or 6% of the total group - could be evidence that in a longer life span, a major creative growth period could begin even later than 50.

We have not even begun to explore the conclusions which can be drawn from these trends. The question is: how do we help today's 50-year-olds (and ourselves) manifest their potential in a society which is rife with age bias of all kinds?

First, we need to come to terms with the fact that the life course has changed dramatically, and that this change appears to be lasting. Most 50-year-olds are not ready for "retirement," in the sense of doing nothing for the rest of their lives; indeed most 65-year-olds are not ready for that. Regardless of *what* they do, most 50-year-olds will want to stay active - probably for 20 or 30 more years.

Second, we should reconsider the widespread practices of downsizing and early retirement. "Early-retiring" people in their 50's, on the premise that they are expensive to the company salary-wise and "used up" mentally and creatively, may not be good policy in the long run.

The reality, in fact, may be the opposite. The 50-year-olds may be potentially the most useful employees in the company -- just at a point where they could begin making their maximum contribution, having served their apprenticeship and learned everything they need to know to work effectively. Businesses may be ill-advised to slough off their 50-plus employees if they want their companies to run smoothly in the future.

We have a growing epidemic of incompetence in the U.S., which so far has not been adequately explained nor forcefully opposed. Certainly no one appears to have taken it with the seriousness that consumers would like. Stringent downsizing may

be one cause: the elimination of large numbers of experienced workers and their replacement by new recruits, insufficiently trained or in some cases, not trained at all. A company considering downsizing might be much better advised to ask its mature employees to help create new solutions for the company's problems, instead of throwing out the longterm employees and starting from scratch with rank beginners.

Third, there is a large need for career counseling and lifework planning for people in their 50's and older.

The job market is so complex today that it is simply impossible for most people whose primary career is ended by downsizing or early retirement to find the best pathway by themselves. Specialized knowledge is necessary for dealing with adult career-changers, even more so than with young people just entering the workforce.

Fourth, there is a sizeable clientele for retraining and education in the 50's.

Mid-life retraining will undoubtedly become the vogue as the Boomers move into their 50's. In the first 30 years of adult life, people often discover talents that they were not aware of earlier; or their preferences change. Sometimes the profession they originally chose metamorphoses into one whose requirements are no longer agreeable to them. Sometimes the organization they work for itself changes into one which is no longer consonant with their personal values. In all these cases, the person is clearly ready for a new initiative of some kind.

There are many unmet needs here: colleges and universities which do not admit mature adults to normal training and certification programs, or which do not take account of the greater readiness and larger experience of adult students; adult education departments appended as second-class footnoes to major universities, which

reserve the prestige of professional training for university departments and only give intellectual handouts to the adult education curriculum.

With our old-fashioned notion that 50 is the beginning of the end, we have completely ignored the fact that many 50-year-olds are in the market for something new. So too are many people in their 60's. Several people in the Long Careers Study started new careers after 60. One, Washingtonian Evelyn Nef, spent three years training and becoming licensed as a psychotherapist. At 81, she is still in private practice -- a resounding success -- and is now writing her autobiography.

At the recent 50-Plus Eposition in New York City, I spent two hours doing career counseling with a 65-year-old African-American woman who now works as a lay staff member of a kidney dialysis unit in a local hospital. Like Nef, her dream is to return to school and train as a psychologist or MSW, so she can use her considerable wisdom and social talent as a professional counsellor. We spent virtually no time on the question of *whether* she should do it; all our focus was on **HOW**.

Particularly professions that require judgement and human skills - like psychotherapy, law, teaching, and even some health care professions - are attractive to adults in search of a second career. Recently a woman graduated from medical school at the age of 52, the oldest person ever to earn a medical degree in the U.S. We would all benefit by having more of these experienced individuals in such professions.

If a company is forced to early-retire part of its work force, it would be useful to include something like outplacement assistance for those employees who wish to go on working in the same field or to change to a different kind of work altogether.

There is also the question of funding. We have provisions for Social Security retirement income. We do not have, for the most part, provision for retraining grants

to those 45 and over who want or need to change careers. Perhaps employers could be given tax credits for providing retraining funds for mature workers. Foundations might take grants for these purposes into consideration.

Finally, we must also assume that some people will eagerly take early retirement or regular retirement, so they can follow up on interests which lie outside their primary job or career.

For example one couple (not in my study) developed over the years an intense interest in modern art, and with just the small amount of money that they made on their salaries - she was a reference librarian, he a company man -- they formed an astonishing collection. When they retired, they did so eagerly to work on their collection and spend full-time as art experts. There are many other people who will welcome the opportunity to turn their hobbies into more serious interests.

Possible Futures

The lifecourse implications of the new longer lifetime are for the most part still virgin territory. I decided to focus the Long Careers Study on people who had already lived past 65 as a minimum - and in most cases longer -- since there was no other way of gathering accurate information about how a long lifetime changes human experience. But let us suppose that, at some point in the future, the majority of human beings in industrialized nations live to about 110, maintaining the same good health and quality of life that many of our 80-year-olds do today. What would this mean for the life course?

If adult life were to increase by another 50% over its current length - in other words, if it were to lengthen to 110, so that there would be a third complete, old-style "adult lifetime" of 30 years - it would be impossible to predict where the major creative periods would fall. One possibility is that in an adult lifetime of 90 years, a majority would have more than one major creative period.

Each of these periods might have its own generalized set of characteristics, which we would be unable to envision now because of our excessively foreshortened perspective. Two people in the Long Careers Study said to me, for example - one in her late 60's, one in his mid-70's - that now they were beginning to use everything they knew in a more effective and energy-efficient way, so that they could get the results that they wanted with far less expenditure of time and energy. This suggests that the integrative potential for a long lifetime is tremendous, that it is cumulative, and that growth can continue as long as the individual remains alive and in reasonably good health.

I do not believe, however, that this will happen. What I think more likely is an even more extreme scenario: that scientific discoveries during the next twenty years -- particularly in the area of prevention of disease and nutritional and metabolic support of good health in old age -- will produce a society in which a substantial percentage of Americans live to somewhere between 120 and 140.

In a society with this kind of age structure, people would be considered "young" until they reached 60 -- a development that is already being foreshadowed by some of the Boomers and Depression Babies.

Middle Age, or something like it, would begin in the 60's and extend perhaps to 90 or 100.

The term "old age" would be reserved for those whom Bernice Neugarten would call the "old old," those who are *physiologically old* -- i.e. in poor physical health and unable to function as normal adults, regardless of their chronological age.

In such a society, retirement at the age of 65 will be an anachronism - every bit as much so, as a "35-year-old older woman" is to us today.

The present-day change in the length of has given us experiences that are strongly at odds with the existing beliefs and practices of our society. Among the general population 50 is still widely seen as the age when one begins "slowing down." For the Long Careers Study group, it was the age when they began to reach for the stars. The current group of 50-year-olds is 20 to 40 years younger than the Long Careers Study participants. It seems even likelier that they are ready to soar, if we allow them to do so.

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