Committee 5
Re-Visioning the Aging Society:
A Global Perspective

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SCENARIOS FOR AN AGING SOCIETY: CHOOSING OUR FUTURE SELVES

by

Harry R. Moody
Acting Director
Brookdale Center on Aging
Hunter College
New York, New York USA

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SCENARIOS FOR AN AGING SOCIETY:
Choosing our Future Selves

Harry R. Moody, Ph.D.
Brookdale Center on Aging of Hunter College
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Population aging denotes a rise in the average age of the population linked to an increased proportion of elderly people. It is a demographic transition arising under conditions of modernization involving decline in both death rates and birth rates. Population aging is a distinctive and historically unprecedented phenomenon of the 20th century, and it poses a far-reaching challenge to all sectors of society: family, religion, economy, the educational system, health care, and government. From a global perspective, the challenge is most evident in advanced industrialized societies of the "North" (North America, Western Europe, and Japan), while less developed countries of the "South" typically have younger populations. Population aging, therefore, has global and international dimensions, as well as implications for medical technology, intergenerational relationships, and economic development. An aging society, in the final analysis, represents a triumph of longevity and is a cause for celebration. But it also demands a new vision of the human future for, as the Psalmist says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." The problem is how to bring together resources from science and cultural traditions to "re-vision" what an aging society may mean for the 21st century.

Legacy of the Dreams of Reason. There is a haunting late work by the painter Francisco Goya titled "The Dreams of Reason," depicting a sleeper tormented by demons. In that painting Goya evoked the nightmares of the Napoleonic Wars which followed the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Goya's own disillusionment in old age was less a result of aging itself than a contemplation of the unintended consequences of human actions.

Looking back on the twentieth century from its final decade we might have reason enough to join in Goya's dismal mood. Some dreams of reason-- for example, in the vanished form of once-powerful communism-- have proved bitterly disappointing. Yet the liberal heritage of the Enlightenment still retains its power. Tolerance, universal human rights, and self-government are ideals that do not easily disappear, whatever the frustrations of practical experience. These principles remain a precious legacy of the Enlightenment

In our own time the Czech writer and statesman Vaclav Havel has been an eloquent critic of the Enlightenment, a project which, applied mechanistically, has led to what Max Weber called the "iron cage" of modernity, a trap that seems to permit no escape. The fulfillment of the Enlightenment, through the rationalization of society and the ap- plication of technology, was supposed to lead to an abundance of life. But the dream of reason has too often turned into one of Goya's nightmares. We see it in the degradation of popular culture, in the threat of environmental catastrophe, and, yes, in the prolongation of life for frail older people whose existence has lost any meaning for themselves or their families.

By 1995 across the industrialized world an earlier post-W.W. II mood of optimism and growth has now given way to deep anxiety about the future. There is fear that today's children will not have life as good as their parents. Support for the welfare state in Europe remains stronger than in the U.S., but old assumptions and orthodoxies are crumbling everywhere. A legitimation crisis is everywhere in evidence. The need for faith, for a positive image of the future, is paramount. Therefore, it makes sense to speak of revisioning the liberal ideal and also revisioning our image of an aging society.

The Price of Success. But there is irony in any call for revisionism. It seems ironic to call for revision of a political framework that has proven so astonishingly successful.

Liberalism in the U.S. along with the welfare state in Europe have produced policies that have dramatically improved the lives of older people over the past two generations. Indeed, it would correct to say that America's response to old age represents one of the greatest achievements of the welfare state.

Yet success has come at a price, including the ironic truth that this very success is not recognized by either policymakers or the general public. Indeed, it is hard to find anyone ready to celebrate the positive prospects of aging. Perhaps that is the reason why we find it so difficult to imagine a positive future the aging society. In America books on the subject in the 1970s bore gloomy titles like Why Survive? By the 1980s they still had titles like Can America Afford to Grow Old? or Am I My Parents' Keeper? Today, too, the negative message is still fashionable, no matter what the facts tell us. It is hard to begin "revisioning" the aging society when the only image of old age we have is an image of failure and despair.

What is called for in revisioning the aging society is a regulative ideal: a large, overarching idea that could connect aging and the individual life course with the wider public world in which we live. For the last two hundred years that regulative ideal has been the idea of progress. Progress has always implied that the future will be better than the past. The modern mind wants to believe in progress both in the small scale and in the large: for individual lives and for all of society, perhaps even for human history as a whole. In fact, for favored groups today, at least over many years of life, the idea of progress still makes sense as an experienced reality. For instance, economic well-being, measured by income or net worth, tends to increase with advancing age through the seventh decade.

Aging: A Crisis of Explanation. Still, for most people, at some point the music stops, losses accumulate, and an experience of old age comes as a "crisis of explanation," in Robert

What is really at stake in the generational equity debate has little to do with the Social Security surplus or accounting decisions about the payroll tax. These issues serve as symbols of our anxiety about the future. In the 1890s, Carl Schorsky detected the same anxiety about the future in the air of yin de specie Vienna. As the 1990s draws to a close we begin to see an upsurge of millennial consciousness moving toward the year 2000. The question is whether that consciousness can become the basis for a shared image of our collective future in the twenty-first century.

Generativity and Hope. What are the sources of anxiety and hope over the course of life? As baby-boomers confront their own finitude, they will come back to this question over and over again. The question was well identified by Erik Erikson in his eight stages of life, a modern Pilgrim's Progress. Erikson describes "generativity" or "outliving the self" as the principal psychological task of mid-life and maturity. But we can push his point still further and say that generativity must also be an element of social policy. Without that element we cannot begin to understand recent debates over intergenerational justice.

To frame policy proposals without considering our cultural dilemma, our image of aging and the future, will not carry us very far. For example, in the U.S. the new Republican Congress has repealed increased taxes on the affluent aged at a time when the future of financial Medicare itself is in doubt and at a time when programs to help children are being slashed and eliminated. But debates over financing social programs do not begin to reach the deeper challenge of generativity as an matter of family policy, economic policy, and environmental policy. The new Republican leadership, in urging a balanced budget, has proclaimed itself the defender of the needs of the next generation. But these three domains remain crucial: how we treat, or neglect, children; how we save and invest for the future; how

we care for the earth are there any more tangible examples of what "generativity" could mean in public policy?

To define these three domains-- children, investment, and environment-- is to point to areas of serious concern about the future. Older people did not cause these problems; and the old, by themselves, cannot do much to resolve them. But the old, like all other citizens, will have a part to play in responding to those problems and in fashioning a more positive image of the future. That is part of the reason why revisioning an aging society is so crucial for a renewed politics of the welfare state. Such a politics, it is clear, can no longer be simply interest-group liberalism as usual.

The Journey of Life. Kierkegaard said that we live life forward but understand it backwards. From the vantagepoint of old age it becomes clear enough that the course of life eludes efforts at predictability and control. Older people themselves often reminisce about their lives; we hear them speak in life-review about the problematic character of their own life choices. We learn how accident plays a unexpectedly large role, how every choice entails regrets, and how rarely people ever really know what they are getting into. This perennial truth about the role of fate or accident is left out of the idealized notion of a "career."

In a sense, having a career is everything that aging is not. A career means progress, growth, being in charge of your life, and living out a story with a happy ending. A career is a narrative, a script helping us to live a life that makes sense, that is not just "one damn thing after another." In this context Thomas Cole's book The Journey of Life raises a troubling question. In America, at the end of the twentieth century, what is our current cultural script for the "journey of life"? Is it a frequent flyer plan where accumulating progressive mileage counts for everything? Is it a story of unpredictable side trips and diversions, something

altogether different from the older ideal of life as pilgrimage? Or, finally, is this metaphor of a "journey" simply another display in the museum of life course antiquities managed by gerontologists who act as curators for a world we have lost?

For centuries now the great ideas of progress and modernization have had decisive importance in shaping our positive ideals of old age. Now the grand narratives have been discredited but scientific gerontology has offered nothing to replace them. "Successful aging" or the "age-irrelevant society" will not furnish us with a positive image of the second half of life. Late-life creativity and productive aging are useful but partial steps in that direction. We still lack a regulative ideal that binds together the personal and the political. Only such a bond of meaning will withstand the corrosive skepticism about government that is the relentless enemy of liberalism. Without a regulative ideals without a renewed sense of hope, liberalism cannot command consensus or support sacrifices for the common good.

The Politics of Hope. Revisioning an aging society, then, requires a new politics of hope. In his final book, The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics, historian Christopher Lasch draws a contrast between belief in progress and the different and much older idea of hope. Giving up belief in progress does not mean giving up hope. Lasch, citing the work of historian Eugene Genovese, points to the example of slaves in the antebellum South. Slaves certainly did not have an ideology of progress. What they had instead was hope based on a belief in justice: whether in this world or the next, wrongs would be righted. That same belief in hope is what animated Lincoln's Gettysburg Address: a call for sacrifice and a belief in the meaning of sacrifice based on fidelity to principles of justice that bridge the generations.

Ironically, it is hope, not belief in progress, that may furnish a secure foundation for an

aging society. True, the idea of progress invites us to sacrifice immediate pleasures for a better future, for purposes larger than ourselves. But, ironically, that same progressive ideology weakens the spirit of sacrifice by a belief that things will automatically get better. Today, we know better. Sadly, we also seem to hope for less from the future, whether for our children or for our own old age. Diminished hopes do not bode well for a liberal agenda in public policy.

What the young can receive from the old is the wisdom that it is possible to have Hope, even when predictability and "progress are no longer possible.

What we need today above all is a positive image for the future of an aging society. Without an image of aging as abundance of life, of life as a journey toward meaning, we will persist in seeing generations in conflict, in seeing old people as failures, in seeing old age as an embarrassing contradiction to the dreams of reason. But the old are simply our future selves. Today, at the end of the 20th century, moving toward the millennial year 2000, we cannot avoid thinking about our future. Can we at last look into that future and claim it as our own?

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