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RECONSTRUCTING THE PATHWAYS OF LATER LIFE

by

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> The realization that I had to create coherence, conjure up my synthesis, rather than find it, came to me...disturbingly late. Having sawed out the pieces of my jigsaw puzzle, I was faced with the problem of fitting them together. There is a powerful inclination to leave this chore to someone else.
>
> --Wright Morris, The Territory Ahead

The paradox: the irrelevance of chronological age in an increasingly age-graded society

During the twentieth century Americans have come to rely more and more on institutions to give shape to successive phases of their lives. These structures, in turn, often use "age" to assign tasks and to allocate resources. Consider the increasing significance of schools in defining the first half of the life course. Few attended school on a regular basis in the early years of the Republic. Students from age three to twenty-three sat in the same classroom. Nowadays, boys and girls generally start kindergarten at the age of five, and nearly everywhere they are required to attend school until their sixteenth birthday. Similarly, going to college at the turn of the century was a privilege reserved for the children of the elite. Now, it is a rite of passage that most begin if not complete. In between, U.S. junior highs and high schools give context to adolescent social dynamics. In keeping with our understanding of human development, curricula and extramural activities at all levels currently are designed to be age-graded.

Entrepreneurs pitch ads to teenagers who take spring vacations, join fraternities and sororities, and buy clothes at the GAP. Thanks to mass education, mass consumption, and mass media, a youth cult pervades America. (For its origins in the 1920s, see Fass [1977]; see also Buchmann [1989]).

Institutions play a comparable role at the other end of the life course. The meanings and experiences of "retirement" have changed as the U.S. has become a more bureaucratic society. Noah Webster once talked about farmers retiring in the winter, and young children retiring to their books. After the enactment of Social Security in 1935, employers and employees created elaborate mechanisms to replace the wages of workers who quit jobs on account of age or disability. Organizations such as the American Association of Retired Persons provide members discounts on travel and drugs, and serve as a potent lobbying group in Washington (Graebner, 1980; Achenbaum, 1986). AARP is now the second largest (after the Roman Catholic Church) institution in the country; its major publication, Modern Maturity, has the biggest circulation of any periodical in the world.

The bureaucratization and commodification of the life course is also evident in the ways that Americans deal with dependency at both ends of human development. Although the United States is the only industrialized country in the world without a government-funded child-care plan, public programs currently exist to assist welfare mothers with young children. Medicare and nursing homes focus on the sick elderly. People between forty and sixty-five claim relatively few age-specific associations beyond the Rotary and Junior League--though it might be said that all institutions serve middle-

aged interests unless otherwise stipulated. Thus a wide array of age-based social institutions interact with those organizations and rituals that identify and differentiate Americans on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, and class.

These institutional analogs to modern-day conceptions of human development reflect and affect our ideas of what it means to grow older and eventually to die. Whereas the Psalmist implored YHWH to "teach us to order our days rightly, that we may enter the gate of wisdom" (90:12), a different sort of age-consciousness characterizes modern times. Americans prefer to number their days with eyes fixed on the calendar. Any answer (whether honest or dishonest) to the question "How old are you?" has social consequences (Chudacoff, 1989). While the State of Michigan permits my elder daughter to drive, her friends in Pittsburgh, where we used to live, are not old enough yet to be eligible for learning permits. At dinner the other night my former student was carded, but I was not. Because people's experiences are often cohort-specific, different age groups do not share the same collective memories. As a draftee during the Vietnam-War era, I was very interested in how Bill Clinton, Al Gore, and Dan Quayle dealt with 1-A, 2-C, or 4-F statuses. For men of my age, issues surrounding citizenship, social responsibility, and integrity were sharpened by the confluence of their personal destinies and the course of a nation. Yet a white, middle-class, male member of the so-called Generation X probably would not frame issues concerning national service as I do.

In addition, during the very period in which the United States became more age-graded, demographic trends transformed the population structure and undercut society's age consciousness. By the 1930s, if not before, policy analysts and social scientists began

monitoring "a nation of elders in the making." Steady increases in the numbers of older people raised apprehension. "In no other country," wrote Marie Dallach (1933), "does the basis of age alone furnish so definite a line of demarcation between a portion of the population recognized as economically efficient and socially attractive and that part of it which is neither useful nor particularly attractive" (see also Linton, 1942; Parsons, 1942). The graying of the U.S. population, as well as that of every advanced-industrial nation and most developing countries, accelerated after World War II. The number of Americans over sixty-five doubled between 1950 and 1984; the percentage over eighty-five quadrupled during the same period. Experts predict that population aging will require major technological innovations and institutional adjustments: "Very high proportions of elderly persons and very high dependency ratios, accompanying continuing low fertility and very low mortality, could have profound social and economic consequences. Education, health care, housing, recreation, and work life could be affected by changes in age structure" (Pifer and Bronte, 1986).

Along with population aging have occurred in the U.S. profound changes in individual aging. There have been dramatic gains in life expectancy at birth: children born in 1790 had as much chance of reaching their first birthdays as children born in 1970 have of celebrating their sixty-fifth. Demographers claim that two-thirds of improvement in longevity in world history has occurred since 1900 (Preston, 1984). These "added" years have altered people's options and expectations in varying ways. Men and women (re)marrying and (re)divorcing in their seventies are no more unusual nowadays than thirty-something welfare recipients taking care of their grandchildren.

The extension of life has lead to a prolongation, not a compression, of morbidity: the longer people live, the greater the odds that they will suffer from Alzheimer's or be plagued by chronic disabilities that diminish their independence. By the same token, thanks to better health promotion (such as reduction in smoking), pharmacological interventions, and surgery, many remain vigorous at advanced ages. Few octogenarians beat twenty-year olds on the tennis court, but the best can hold their own. Conversely, the ravages of the AIDS epidemic signal that chronicity and death can no longer be associated exclusively with old age. The "denial of death" remains ubiquitous, but members of the sandwich generations increasingly perceive that they have more in common with their surviving parents than they earlier thought.

Perhaps the biggest result of changes in population and individual aging have been the resulting shifts in meanings and norms associated with all stages of the life course. The range of possibilities and challenges ascribed to successive life periods have blurred, becoming interchangeable. Senior citizens sign up for Elderhostels and run marathons. Some Yuppies resemble greedy geezers: on Wall Street they often burn out or have made enough to retire by their late thirties. "Puer senex" does not fully capture the malady that psychologists use to describe pre-schoolers who are alternately hurried or harried.

So, in many situations we are defined, and we define ourselves, simply by how old we are. Given bureaucracies' need for straightforward criteria for categorizing people, "age" has importance as a benchmark independent of its value in predicting a person's socio-economic characteristics. Yet, according to gerontologists, chronological age is a

poor predictor of health status, psychological well-being, and mental aptitude. For several decades researchers on aging have tried, without success, to find "markers" at the genetic and organic levels that correlate functional and biological age, thereby enabling scientists to predict those intrinsic and extrinsic factors that might account for significant changes in muscle capacity or cognitive capabilities from one point of time to the next (Bookstein and Achenbaum, 1992). Due to changes in the legal system, educational structure, and work force, moreover, "new inconsistencies with regard to age-appropriate behavior are appearing in informal age norms as well as in the norms codified in law" (Neugarten and Neugarten, 1986).

Paradoxically, ours is a highly age-graded society, wherein chronological age is an increasingly irrelevant benchmark for meaning and experience in most domains of human existence. Novel ways to categorize the "new old", such as differentiating between the "young-old" and the "old-old" in order to underscore the heterogeneity of older Americans (Neugarten, 1974), have merely led to a new set of reified categories, ones that do not capture the diversity of late-life experiences. And while formulations such as "the third quarter of life" help us to rethink "the use of resources, the productivity of older citizens, the locus of responsibility, and intergenertional equity" (Pifer, 1986), mapping out new roles for people between the ages of fifty and seventy-five has yet to yield a guide useable by men and women in (or about to enter) that age group. In fact, recent efforts to understand the effects of "age" have mainly served to underscore the greater salience of race, gender, and class in facilitating or frustrating opportunities at various stages of life.

Accordingly, as a new century and milennium draws near, it seems timely to reconsider the ways that we conceptualize human existence from womb to tomb. I ground this exercise in a socio-historical context by surveying how people at other times and in other places imagined life to be played out. Have men and women elsewhere divided life into "stages?" What accounts for variations in the number of stages delineated? Do stages describe "modal" tendencies, or do they permit choices along divergent paths? Do images of the life course correspond (literally or metaphorically) to religious tenets, physiological realities, or to other means of measuring time? Are conceptions of the life course circulating in "modern" cultures based on more "complex" models of growth and development than the Ancients envisioned? Are sex differences as likely to be noted in Classical as in post-modern constructs?

Stages of life

Hebrew scripture consistently proclaims that only YHWH, "Who can count the sands of the sea, the drops of rain, or the days of unending time" (Eccl. 1:2), has enough wisdom to take measure of humankind's nature (See also Jer. 10:10, Prov. 4:4, Wis. 3:10-19). Hence the children of Israel, fearing YHWH, tried to number their days in accordance with Torah and todah. For instance, the Psalmist (90: 10) described the finitude of life in strikingly modern tones: "Seventy years is the span of our life, eighty if our strength holds; the hurrying years are labour and sorrow, so quickly they pass and are forgotten." The psalmist's words presage contemporary sensibilities, but it is worth noting that that particular verse was understood to affirm "traditional" cultic beliefs, not

confirm recent gerontologic survey data. The people of Israel valued long life, but not necessarily for its own sake. "Like a tree planted beside a watercourse," those who delight in the law of the Lord yield "its fruit in season and its leaf never withers" (Ps. 1:3). Rejoicing in and obeying Torah is key. Older people may have had more opportunities to gain essential insights, but wisdom was not just obtained through living long (Ps. 119: 100; see also, Isenberg, 1992).

That the Israelites thought that each stage of life had different relative merits can be discerned in other parts of the Hebrew scripture. When the Lord spoke to Moses about the fulfillment of religious vows (Lev. 27: 1-8), age and sex categories as well as poverty status were relevant criteria. Men in their prime (that is, between the ages of 20 and 50) were to pay fifty silver shekels; females were valued at thirty shekels. Men over 60 were required to pay only fifteen shekels, five less than a male between the ages of 5 and 20. (Women in both of these age groups were expected to contribute ten shekels.) While this suggests a devaluation of later years, the elderly nonetheless were levied more than persons between the ages of one month and five years (5 and 3 shekels respectively). Here, then, Hebrew scripture characterizes the human life course in terms of a curvilinear trajectory differentiated by age and sex.

Since the Jesus movement began in Jerusalem, it is not surprising that the New Testament complements much in Hebrew scripture. Both volumes, for instance, differentiate between the roles played by middle-aged men and women. Subtle variations merit careful scrutiny, however, because even slight ones often point to divergent outlooks. The notion of collective aging as a metaphoric "race," reflected in

Ecclesiastes 9:11, has parallels in Paul, who talks about his own "journey of faith" as a race and equates his own discipleship with "winning the prize" (Dannefer, 1991). Yet the Apostle also clearly glories in the discipline and efforts that runners and boxers must endure to be champions (I Cor. 9: 24-27). Similarly, it is instructive to compare descriptions of various age groups in Hebrew scripture and in the New Testament. Children are a blessing in both volumes. The New Testament parallels Hebrew scripture in stressing that covenantal blessings and responsibilities pass from generation to generation (compare Is. 22: 20-6 with 2 Jn 1:4). Still, more than is the case in Hebrew texts, several Gospels (Mk 10: 17, Lk 18:16) report that Jesus emphasized the place of children in the Kingdom. I do not mean to suggest that only children are privileged New Testament figures. Pauline texts, such as the fifth chapter of his first letter to Timothy, emphasize that young and old must respect one another; it goes on to specify certain rights and responsibilities for widows.

Despite such references to children and elders, there appears to be less emphasis on "stages" in the New Testament than in Hebrew scripture. For our purposes, Ephesians 4: 7, 13-16 serves as the critical passage. The hope is that "we all attain...to mature manhood, measured by nothing less than the full stature of Christ." This Pauline image of aging, in contrast to the age-specific categories in Hebrew Scripture, accentuates the theme of continuity. Growth begins at birth, stretches through the course of life ("bonded and knit together by every constituent joint"), and ends when one becomes fully incorporated into the Body of Christ. Regardless of how long one lives, such maturity is not attainable in this world (Bouwsma, 1978; Achenbaum, 1985).

This is not the only fundamental difference concerning the life course that exists between Hebrew scripture and the New Testament. Christ, believed to be both Son of God and Son of Man, is the paradigmatic figure of individuation in the Christian Bible. It does not follow from this assertion, however, that any single model of the life course based on the life of the Christ can presume to encapsulate the Christian view of human development. For nineteen centuries, generation after generation has produced its own interpretations of Jesus, and they vary considerably. To take one contemporary example: Much of the literature in religious gerontology, which is directed at Christians, stresses the importance of the Resurrection. It offers comforting, optimistic views on aging. Looking at aging and old age from the perspective of the Cross, however, would impel commentators to dwell on the existential realities of suffering (Sapp, 1987). And, to take a step further, it is not too large a leap to go from acknowledging the human condition of dependency--"the life I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20)--to a Jungian interpretation of individuation as an affirmation of St. Augustine's observation that "you are God's orphan, God's widow" (Edinger, 1972). Neither Augustine's assertion nor Jung's inference would be accepted in most congregations and denominations.

Thus, while the Bible is probably the single most important source of ideas and images about human development in western civilization, it hardly conveys a consistent set of propositions. The New Testament did not simply incorporate the best from Hebrew scripture and add some interesting twists. As biblical scholars have shown, the collection of texts sacred to Judaism and Christianity took shape in both traditions after

70 A.D. Their separate historical origins must be respected. Additional differences have accumulated with the creation and dissemination of subsequent commentaries in both the Jewish and Christian communities. There are, consequently, many clusters of biblical images of the stages of life.

Graeco-Roman culture provides the other major wellspring of tragic, ironic, poignant, and heroic perceptions about the life course in western society. More than is evident in biblical passages, bipolarity exemplified both Greek mythology and adult relationships. Leaving the ranks of the neoi signalled admission into eldership. The term mesos--the closest equivalent to our notion of "middle-aged"-- is rarely used to describe men; it never refers to women (Garland, 1990). Hellenistic writers had great interest in men in their prime, however. Aristotle devotes most of his Nichomachean Ethics to the middle stages of human existence. The bipolarity focuses by turns, but not in tandem, on contrasts between the character traits of Young Men and Elderly Men or on the deterioration attributed to old age (See also Aristotle's Treatise on Rhetoric [Book 2, Ch. 13] and Politics [Book 2, Ch. 9].) Nor are the years between youth and age treated monolithically. Aristotle claims in the Rhetoric that the body is at its prime between the ages of 30 and 35, while the mind does not reach its apex until age 49. Like modern writers, ancient philosophers acknowledged in their construction of the human life course.

In ways paralleling but not resembling the quest for Christian maturity, Socratic and Platonic thought emphasized "eudaimonism," a search for self-actualized excellence. The quest presupposed class-based standards appropriate for particular stages of adult

development. The ideal was a state of potentiality defined innately on one's own terms. Aristotle excluded children from eudaimonism because they were "not yet capable of such acts" (Norton, 1976). The theme intrigued others in the Classical era: Seneca's "praebere se fato"--choose yourself--echoes the Grecian ideal way of life.

Roman poets, dramatists, politicians, and critics added their own insights to the Classical catalog of the assets and liabilities of growing older. Once again, the multiplicity of meanings found in the literature often are refractions of class, gender, mental aptitude, and physical condition (de Beauvoir, 1972). Sometimes Roman writers depicted the stages of life in analogical terms. Hence Ovid in the Metamorphoses talked about "the year assuming four aspects, in imitation of our own lifetime." Others, following Ptolemy, compared "the age-divisions of mankind" to "the order of the seven planets." Images of the last stage vary. Plutarch's essys and Terence's plays are filled with savage references to aging men and women's lechery, buffoonery, and foibles. And yet, De Senectute is arguably the most glorious paean to old age ever composed. Written by Cicero in his sixty-third year, the essay celebrates the elderly's success in weathering the physical, emotional, and moral dangers of youth and middle age. Having at last put their affairs in order, those who have acquired wisdom and lived virtuously can face death with stoic resignation. Lest such Ciceronian rhetoric lull us into portraying ancient Rome as a "golden age" for Senators, it is well to remember that the phrase sexagenarius de ponte referred to the practice of drowning decrepit senior citizens in the Tiber River.

The repertoire of pre-modern styles in depicting the human life course grew

during the Middle Ages. J. A. Burrow (1986) demonstrates that conceptions of The Ages of Man often differ by discipline. Biologists in the medieval period divided life into three stages; physiologists favored four-stage models, whereas astrologers create seven-stage ones. In addition to scientific treatises, sacred and secular art, material culture, social commentaries, and literary works offer different rationales for three-, four-, six-, seven-, nine-, and ten-fold organismic representations of the life course (as well as several other minor traditions). "How on earth," wonders that astute British academic and social critic Peter Laslett (1987), "can our ancestors possibly have believed in such a load of rubbish?" Yet, as Laslett goes on to note (assuming Burrow's catalog to be comprehensive), it is striking that no medievalist related the stages of life to the days of the week or procession of planets against fixed stars. This suggests a certain artificiality to medieval conceptions of the journey of life.

People's understanding of the stages of life, then no less than now, are literally social constructions, figments of the imagination. Iconographic concern for symmetry notwithstanding, the stark truth is that the journey of life from conception to death has never been wholly subject to human control. Artists and writers in the Middle Ages grasped this point. A central theme of medieval writings and art is that the course of life is "an unpredictable journey among familiar landmarks, with perfect age perhaps, or perhaps not, awaiting man in the middle of the way" (Dove, 1986). This is why medieval thinkers picked and chose among various traditions in western civilization. Most emphasized Jewish rather than Greek strains of Christian thought to punctuate their sense that death stalked all stages of development. Images of the Grim Reaper, in fact,

animated their concern for the consummation of vitality.

Once the essential artificiality of constructs is comprehended, it ironically becomes more rather than less tempting to stress parallels in ways that people at different times and places perceive human development. And yet, accentuating points of convergence in various traditions risks conveying an essentialist image of aging. This is why as much attention should be paid to the distinctiveness of imagery in the Middle Ages as to their sources of inspiration. Christian theology ca. 1400, after all, was not the same as that expressed by the Desert Fathers a milennium earlier. Similarly, east-west comparisons are often quite superficial. In England during the late Middle Ages, for instance, writers often associated various stages with the Wheel of Life--an image that brings to mind Hindu renditions. The comparison is imaginative, but wrong-headed. Actually, the British imagery was grounded in two distinct, time-bound, localized literary traditions--with no traceable connection to Eastern conceptions of stages.

Indeed, except for visualizing the ends of the life course in similar ways, nearly all claims to universalism in representing what lies between birth and death proves illusory. Even the notion that life "progresses" becomes difficult to demonstrate in nomothetic ways, as studies of turning points in people's lives make clear. Earlier in this century Arnold van Gennep showed how people in different cultures used rituals to mark transitions from one age to another. Building on Gennep's insight, Victor Turner offered a series of ethnographic studies of Africa and Latin America that elaborate circumcision rituals and other rites marking the entrance into adulthood. Besides describing the formal aspects of rituals, Turner discussed the boundaries and meanings of "liminality" to

people in various communities. "Rites de passage are found in all societies," Turner notes (1967), but he went on to elaborate that the transition itself reflects and diffuses "different cultural properties" that vary by place, state, position, and age. The symbolic richness and institutional significance of turning points, in other words, lie in understanding the particularity of the liminal moment itself.

Another cross-cultural approach has been to compare how major world religions deal with "suffering," an experience that cannot be exclusively associated with any particular stage of the life course. Like Jewish and Christian sacred texts, the Koran acknowledges that suffering is an essential feature of the human condition. Yet none of these traditions defines the "problem" of suffering the same way. According to John Bowker (1970), "In Judaism of the Biblical period the problem was located primarily in distribution, in Christianity it was located primarily in vindication;" in Islam, however, suffering cannot be viewed as problemmatic because an Omnipotent God controls all. Neither Jewish nor Christian nor Islam traditions, in turn, approximates the emphasis placed on Nothingness or the release from suffering which is found in Hindu and Buddhist traditions (Desai, 1989; DuBose et al., 1994).

The futility in trying to homogenize different traditions' views of any stage of human development is evident, moreover, in linguistic conundra. To wit: the Hindu samsara, the stream of life, evisages individuals passing through four stages--pupil, householder, forester [retirement], and wanderer [sage]. Despite difficulties in finding English equivalents for Indian terms, the Indian model superficially complements western ideas: its four-fold division harks back to ancient Greek and medieval models of personal

growth that passes from childhood through adolescence and maturation to old age (Norton, 1976). Other parallels made it possible for Hermann Hesse in Siddhartha (1951) to join east with west in his portrayal of spiritual exploration: "Siddhartha had a single goal--to become empty...to let the Self die. No longer to be Self, to experience the peace of an emptied heart,to experience pure thought--that was his goal." The notion that true wisdom is realizable only after emptying one's Self has points of correspondence with Pauline theology and the writings of Thomas Merton and Erik Erikson, who have explored eastern traditions (Streng, 1967; Merton, 1985; Erikson, 1969). But huge cultural differences nonetheless provide dissimilar contexts for interpreting the image of emptying oneself. "Class" divisions obviously exist in all societies, but few westerners can appreciate the extent to which "caste" differentiates ways that Indians pass through stages of life (Zimmer, 1951). In the end, the Indian typology must be understood on its own terms.

Recent forays into cross-cultural psychoanalytic ethnographies confirm that over-arching generalizations based on biblical, Classical, Cartesian, or positivist principles have limited applicability even in countries that greatly interact with the West. "I have found from my work in India, Japan, and America that the intrapsychic self varies significantly if not radically according to the social and cultural patterns of societies so civilizationally different," reports Alan Roland (1988). "I find that people have a different experiential, affective sense of self and relationships, as well as vastly different internalized world views that given profoundly different meanings to everyday experiences and relationships." In each culture, women and men who tap into the

spiritual dimensions of the human condition use different strategies for integrating across public spheres and private realms their sense of familial self and individualized self.

That said, this brief survey of representations of human development has yielded some posiive findings. The very incommensurability of twentieth-century, western ideas with images of the journey of life crafted at other times and in other places alerts us to possible blinders in our current way of conceiving of growth from womb to tomb. At least two insights may prove instructive as we reconstruct images and metaphors to take account of added years and of the unprecedented opportunities and obstacles that older persons currently experience.

First, in reformulating our ideas about the human life course, we should be wary of affixing any teleological underpinnings to our conceptions. Scriptural maxims notwithstanding, the blessings associated with living long do not always outweigh the burdens. I do not, of course, imply conversely that growing older is invariably a Fall from Grace. Older people, like younger ones, must come to terms with the joys, sorrows, paradoxes, ambiguities, and fragility of being human. Having lived well, elderly men and women sometimes discover that they have greater options than they did in the past. Those who age "successfully" generally have learned to adapt to the contingencies of life (Rowe and Kahn, 1987). For others, disabilities narrow choices in later years. Some aged persons become overwhelmed by vicissitudes. There is no fool-proof recipe for attaining a "good old age." People differ. Perceptions vary. Situations change.

Nor are events earlier in one's life altogether satisfactory predictors of what is to follow. Researchers at the National Institute on Aging have documented that certain

psychological traits identified in particular men and women in their fourth decade remain evident until they die (Shock, 1984). But it does not follow that all characteristics remain fixed. Bio-gerontologists and geriatricians have shown that the mere passage of time affects the capacities of various body parts. By turns dramatically or subtly altering the arena of human interactions, history changes social circumstances, thus creating new contexts for growing older. Individual and societal trajectories rarely dovetail. Cultural and structural lags occur in all cultures, which belie the linearity presumed in terms such as "human development" or its institutional analog, "modernization." The equivalents for the word "development" in Sanskrit, a Thai Buddhist monk once remarked, are "disorderliness" or "confusion." And taking a cue from Ivan Illich, it is worth mentioning that the root idea of development comes from the Latin term "progressio," which can also mean "madness." No wonder Sigmund Freud, Gregory Bateson, and R. D. Laing have all seized on the continuity between health and illheath as markers of the well-being of contemporary civilization (Sivaraksa, 1986; Nandy, 1986). Survival, in short, is often a brute fact, not a moral victory.

A second insight prompted by a survey of historical and cross-cultural alternatives to late-twentieth-century western ideas about human growth and aging is the realization that "stage" typologies should be discarded. Psychologists have amply documented deficiencies in "life-cycle" concepts that focus primarily on events and experiences occurring before the end of child-bearing years. Furthermore, gerontologists have demonstrated that extra years of life have changed the landscape of later years: Most researchers acknowledge the fallacy of equating senesence with aging, in

contradistinction to growth or development (Bryman et al., 1987; Achenbaum, forthcoming). Stages are inherently arbitrary. Thus, the presumed analytic value of stage typologies--their usefulness in delineating sequences of "norms" and "expectations"--is undercut by the very fluidity and range of cognitive, physical and emotional capacities at every moment in a person's life, qualities that are reworked and reevaluated in every changing social domains (Toulmin, 1971).

Accordingly, the title of this essay refers to "pathways," not stages. As David Plath (1980) pointed out in his study of maturity in modern Japan, "pathways vary in their appeal for different persons or for the same person at different phases of life. They also shift in popularity with the shifting slopes of history. Events may discredit an institution and threby bring into disrepute the pathway it embodies. Adults may find that the pathway instilled in them early in life is now out of joint with the times." Thinking in terms of "flow" or "streams" has another advantage. Whereas most stage models are unidirectional, one can turn around along a pathway. In the process several routes to the same general destination may unfold. As researchers on aging have noted in their analyses of fairy tales and drama, the metaphor of the pathway is especially useful in revealing sharp, even startling, turns of direction, in facing unexpected vistas and in making sense of relationships formed with fellow travelers (Chinen, 1989; Kastenbaum, 1994).

The search for Wisdom as a paradigm for late-life development

In reconstructing contemporary conceptions of the human development, our focus

should be on the second half of life. Compared to infancy, childhood, youth, and early adulthood, the later span of existence has fewer familial and institutional benchmarks to signify changes in status or shifts in responsibilities. The years that men and women have gained in the twentieth century, moreover, have been "added" to the latter half of the life course. Much of the terrain is uncharted. "There is no road ahead," a 1976 Women's Seminary Quarterly booklet put it, "We make the road as we go" (Morton, 1985). To recognize that there are uncertain twists in future pathways, however, is not to discount the value of old points of reference that might still serve our present purposes. Lacking maps but possessing compasses, we should look for places where individuals are encouraged but not incessantly monitored as they probe the mysteries of the human condition. Organized religion often provides such a milieu.

Stories about literal and metaphorical pilgrimages yield much information about the ways that people try to make sense of their lives. As William James pointed out in his magisterial The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), religious fields historically have partitioned what he called the "institutional" and the "personal" branches. Given differences in human sensibilities and burdens, people do not manifest identical religious elements. Indeed, religious calls and beliefs tend to become highly individuated, regardless of how deeply rooted and shared in faith communities. "The pivot round which religious life...revolves is the interest of the individual in his personal destiny." Case studies of contemporary longings for meaning and purpose by modern psychologists corroborate James's assertion (Satinover, 1994).

The institutional complement to these diverse individual insights and experiences,

according to James, were structural forms that are also variegated: "In its acuter stages every religion must be a homeless Arab of the desert." Designed to serve gods whom no humans can control, religions constitute a "sacred canopy" for dealing with transcendent issues and immanent matters. To facilitate people's supplications, religious liturgies range from the ascetic to the highly ritualized. Yet, as James brilliantly grasped, even nomads form highly complex social relationships; persons in those settings create institutions that take advantage of scientific insight as well as spiritual insights in coping with problems. "Science gives to all of us telegraphy, electric lighting, and diagnosis....[religion] gives to some of us serenity, moral poise, and happiness," the Harvard psychologist observed. "Evidently, then, the science and the religion are both of them genuine keys for unlocking the world's treasure house to him who can use either of them practically."

I propose a paradigm for understanding late-life development that builds on James's critique by utilizing contemporary analyses of religion, spirituality, and aging (McFadden and Gerl, 1990). Recent empirical studies suggest three reasons why this may be a promising approach. First, in terms of self-reported spirituality, reliance on prayer, and attendance at weekly events, older people express more religious commitments than younger ones. In addition to religion's importance for African-Americans and for women, a majority of white men over fifty report that religion became more significant to them as they aged. Spiritual support provides a coping mechanism for those suffering from disability, severe or terminal illnesses, or other economic, familial or psychological losses (Birren, 1990; Koenig, 1994). Second, religious

involvement may contribute indirectly to the elderly's physical, mental, and social well-being. Participation in events reinforces and often enhances people's networks; it can give individuals a sense that others will be there, if and when necessary (Levin, 1994). Third, there is some evidence that older men and women actively engaged in spiritual quests may intuit a different sense of themselves as aging people, and in the process, new cognitive skills (Shulik, 1988; Sinnott, 1994).

Confining attention to those people who have evinced some religious commitments or spiritual sensibilities limits the applicability of this approach to understanding the dynamics of late-life development. As James noted, only "a certain class of persons" pursue religious pathways. For my purposes, even the field of religious gerontology is too eclectic, too uneven to sustain the prosopographic analysis to be undertaken here. Accordingly, I have chosen to focus on the search for wisdom as a religious motif. The author of the Book of Job 28:20-28 encapsulates many biblical themes about Wisdom, which hark back to themes set forth in this essay:

> Where then does wisdom come from,
> and where is the source of understanding?
> No creature on earth can see it,
> and it is hidden from the birds of the air.
> Destruction and death say,
> 'We know of it only by report.'
> But God understands the way to it,
> he alone knows its source;
> For he can see to the ends of the earth
> and he surveys everything under heaven.
> When he made a counterpoise for the wind
> and measured out the waters in proportion,
> When he laid down a limit for the rain
> and a path for the thunderstorm,
> Even then he saw wisdom and took stock of it,
> he considered it and fathomed its very depths.

And he said to man:
The fear of the Lord is wisdom,
and to turn from evil is understanding.

Wisdom is part of the divine order. In Hebrew scripture the term hokhmah refers to God's prowess in creation; sometimes Wisdom is personified in ways that resemble Sophia in Hellenistic culture. New Testament commentators relate wisdom themes to Q (the sayings atttributed to Jesus that are incorporated in several Gospels) as well as to Christ the Sage, the Word made Flesh (Wilkin, 1975; Eliade, 1987). Sacred texts assert that mortals seek Wisdom everywhere. Instruction in the ways of Wisdom constitute a liminal moment in the succession of generations (Perdue, 1981). Yet mortals never possess Wisdom. Scripture teaches that those who respect YHWH with awe in their thoughts, feelings, and actions grow wiser, but they will never grasp Wisdom herself (Achenbaum and Orwoll, 1991).

The search for Wisdom, as presented in Scripture and as embodied in the lives of secular figures generally considered to have acted wisely, has several striking similarities to aspects of late-life development that I believe should be accentuated. It is a pathway that begins with an **awakening**, a realization that an individual wishes to be more self-conscious, more creative about his or her options mindful of the finitude of human existence. Sometimes **suffering** (to use Eric Cassell's definition, a pain that has future ramifications) prompts a desire to explore how those intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal aspects of Self relate to a larger order. To the extent that old ways of making sense of life grow increasingly inadequate, a sense of **brokenness** ensues. Assuming that the collapse of former ways does not result in paralysis or suicide, a

change of heart ensues. The theological term for this major transition is metanoia--a "renewal" of purposeness, a return to basics. With a new set of eyes and ears, men and women strive to **re-member** (thus connecting themselves with past and future in the present) and to **re-integrate** themselves to attain a more whole, perhaps even holier, sense of integrity, one that embraces both immanent and transcendent realities. Thus when death occurs, those who have intimations of Wisdom **return** to dust, like Job, with fuller understanding of the glories and limitations of the human condition.

I recognize that the preceding paragraph is too dense. Table One offers concrete examples of the journeys of life I want to illustrate. The seven "pathways" were inspired originally by my grappling with the Book of Job. Although modified by subsequent reading, they remain hypotheses to be tested. I represent them here as pathways, not stages. Only two--the first and the last--are probably universally experienced: Everybody dies, and to be on the search for wisdom requires a self-conscious acknowledgement of that quest. Hence, I do not suggest that "suffering" necessarily must precede "renewal." Unravelling the varieties of experiences in the search for Wisdom is a major goal.

I hope to illustrate these various pathways with the examples shown in Table One. Under "archetypes," I have listed both biblical illustrations and the names of "wise" men and women that should be familiar to most readers. The core of each chapter will be an exploration of the "modern" examples. With one exception, each was born between 1880 and 1930. Each wrote at least three pieces that yield sufficient autobiographical information as to enable some stock-taking of their late-life development. I doubt, however, that most people seek out wisdom on isolated paths, which is why the

significant relationships of the figures analyzed are taken very seriously. That is, I am convinced that Joan Erikson was a major source of inspiration for Erik Erikson, and vice versa. Studying networks of affiliations thus is a major task.

As men and women in the 21st century seek to enrich their added years with meaning, they will discover that their sense of Self in society alternates between fixed and "floating worlds," as the Japanese put it. New conceptions of the life course are necessary, which will be doubtless become institutionalized through rituals, films, and social customs invented to deal with individual and population aging. "To live, to breathe, and to generate novelty, human beings have had to create--by structural means--spaces and time in the calendar or, in the cultural cycles of their most cherished groups which cannot be captured in the classificatory nets of their quotidian, routinized spheres of action," declares Victor Turner (1969). "These liminal areas of time and space...are open to the play of thought, feeling, and will; in them are generated new models." Viewing the pathways of late-life development as a search for Wisdom may create new synthetic models out of ancient traditions.

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26

TABLE ONE

Possible Dramatis Personae for Wise Elders

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Pathway	Archetypes	"Modern" Example
Awakening	Abraham and his kin Christiana in Pilgrim's Progress	Joan/Erik Erikson
Suffering	Mary Magdalene Albert Schweitzer	Langston Hughes
Brokenness	Job and his friends Robert E. Lee	Gerald Vizenor and Native Americans
Re-newal	Cornelius & Peter Jacob and the angel Clare & Francis of Assisi Emily Dickinson	Dorothy Day & Catholic Workers
Re-membering	I Isaiah; Ben Sirach W. E. B. DuBois	Weisel and the Holocaust narratives
Re-integrating	Naomi and Ruth Antoine de Saint Exupery	Eleanor & FDR
Returning	Anna & Simeon Buddha	Robert Jay Lifton Lewis Thomas or Maggie Kuhn

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