

## Foreword

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The culture of aging and the aged is a distinctly modern phenomenon. Until very recently in our society, to reach three score and ten was the exception. Now it is the rule. Time was when to ask after the meaning of growing old or being old would have seemed absurd. Today the question is becoming urgent.

It is commonplace that questions about meaning are prompted by change. While frontiers are being pushed back, a certain impatience with considerations of meaning prevails. But now that the expectation of physical life has been extended and further extension seems imminent, we are bound to ask: What for? What are the purposes of more life? Assuming that longer life is not an absolute good, what sort of old age is desirable? What sort livable? Old people themselves do not speak with one voice but they are nonetheless the best source of answers to these questions.

Arnold Toynbee wrote in his seventy-eighth year, "The ordeal of which I am most conscious at this stage is that of having to draw in my horns." Necessity looms large in the writings of the old. Physical energy is less plentiful than earlier in life. Resilience wanes. Both physically and spiritually one has to work at what once came effortlessly. As Emerson, at sixty-one, noted, "The grief of old age is, that, now, only in rare moments, and by happiest combinations or consent of the elements, can we attain those enlargements and that intellectual *elan*, which were once a daily gift."

Having to acknowledge one's limits is not an unalloyed evil.

Hemingway's old fisherman says to his young companion, "I may not be as strong as I think . . . but I know many tricks and I have resolution." His luck has lagged but not his determination. His eyes, though almost blind, are "cheerful and undefeated." He knows his limits and within those he has staying power. The proverbial and admirable wisdom of old age may be misnamed. Perhaps wisdom is a judiciousness seasoned by years that emerges from the necessity to measure one's days.

"I still have my health and my wits," writes Toynbee, "and, so long as my wits do not fail me, my curiosity will not." Losing one's wits is dreaded as a death-in-life, the premature death of the spirit. Nor is health a good in itself but rather a precondition for living well. Freud, in his mid-fifties, confided in a letter to Pastor Pfister, "What would one do if ideas failed or words refused to come? It is impossible not to shudder at the thought. Hence, in spite of all the acceptance of fate which is appropriate to an honest man, I have one quite secret prayer: that I may be spared any wasting away of my ability to work because of physical deterioration."

What are the essential ingredients of a livable old age? Health? Work? Companionship? Intimacy? What else, and in what combination? These were among the leading questions about aging that prompted the work in this volume.

There were other questions—about meaning. Do we make meaning, or do we discover it? Both surely, but perhaps the balance is tipped more toward discovery in youth and toward discernment as one ages. In an important sense, the meaning of a life can be fathomed fully only from the end of that life looking back. Old age is a time for recapitulating, connecting part to part, remembering.

Now that the great cultural systems of participatory meaning have largely lost their compelling power, such recollecting and drawing together are left to individuals. Are there patterns in these individual efforts—in, say, family rituals or the routines of neighborhood life? If there are commonalities in observers' accounts of such rituals and routines, or in autobiographies authored by the old—if old age makes sense "from the inside," whether individually or in concert with others both young and old—then we need to recognize and articulate this implicit meaning. I have in mind, for example, the sorts of reflections one finds in Ronald Blythe's *The View in Winter*, but also contemplative fiction such as A. G. Mojtabai's *Autumn*. Such articulations are valuable guides to the uncharted land of long life.

It is hard to avoid extremes in thinking about what old age means. To be old is to be wise—or foolish. Is there no middle ground? No appreciation of complexity and continuity? Is the doddering foolishness of old age different in kind or only in degree from the brash foolishness of youth? “You must bear with me. Pray you now, forget and forgive. I am old and foolish.” Lear’s folly is not a product of his eighty-odd years but of fondness gone awry.

Another extreme is that of facile celebration of the joys of aging. The poet comes close to this in Whitman’s “Youth, Day, Old Age and Night”:

Youth, large, lusty, loving—youth full of grace,  
     force, fascination,  
 Do you know that Old Age may come after you with  
     equal grace, force, fascination?  
 Day full-blown and splendid—day of the immense  
     sun, action, ambition, laughter,  
 The Night follows close with millions of suns, and  
     sleep and restoring darkness.

Yet surely the grace of old age not only measures up to (“equals”) the robust grace of youth but exceeds it. There is a gracefulness of character that accrues only after long rehearsal, and there is a givenness (the theologian’s grace) that is beyond promise and recompense. This last, when acknowledged and internalized, yields equanimity.

In early 1983, with the generous support of the Sid W. Richardson Foundation, the Institute for the Medical Humanities invited thinkers from the humanities, law, medicine, and the social sciences to train their attention on the relation of aging and meaning. Each participant drafted a paper which was then formally critiqued by a fellow participant at a working meeting in Galveston. (The single exception was a one-act play, *Ump*—a searching character study of an ebullient, hesitantly introspective, aging enforcer of rules and arbiter of baseball disputes—written by project participant Robert Kastenbaum and performed by the playwright and University of Texas Medical Branch faculty.) Papers were subsequently rewritten by their authors and edited by the project directors. Throughout the course of this project, the editors’ perspectives on aging and meaning have remained in creative tension. In Thomas Cole’s view, aging must be understood within an intersubjective web of

cultural meanings that are embedded in social relations and practices. For Sally Gadow, the meaning of aging is to be found in individual subjectivity. These differing approaches, held together by the editors' shared commitment to the problem of aging and meaning, shape the volume and give it its critical edge.

This volume represents a significant advance in the new humanities scholarship on aging. Initiated in the mid 1970s, this work is informed by a sense that much gerontological research and practice tacitly incorporates the social values responsible for ageism and the declining status of old people. In retrospect, the earlier "human values" approach suffered from a diffuseness inevitable in the absence of a common culture. Cole and Gadow invite us to explore the problem of aging and meaning within this historical context of declining collective beliefs.

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