Tinkering Around the Edges or Transforming for a New Life Stage?

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I was recently in a university meeting where we talked about faculty retirement. We discussed ways to support faculty members who were retiring but wanted to keep doing their scholarly work and stay socially connected to the institution. We talked about enabling ongoing connections to the university through electronic resources like e-mail, news updates, and online library resources, among others, and we also talked about space allocation. We acknowledged how regulations and existing practices limited ongoing clinical work and grant funding. In our earnest effort to engage the ever-growing resource of retiring faculty, our thinking was constrained by current institutional setups. We did not start with paradigm-shifting questions like, “What would it take to truly engage and support this talent pool of older adults who aren’t ready to quit?” and “What institutional changes must we make to create this phase of faculty members’ lives to benefit them and our university?” Instead, we suffered from a failure of imagination, stifled by existing rules regarding risk management and academic hierarchies. We were working around the edges, rather than taking on the institutional culture that was developed before the addition of 20–25 more years of life.

In Phyllis Moen’s book, *Encore Adulthood*, she recognizes how often the situation I described is played out—in employment, education, civic, and institutional settings of all types. She discusses the new longevity and how baby boomers live in a new period of life, between conventional adulthood and conventional old age. She describes how our current visions of *what could be* in this emerging phase of life are constrained by deeply engrained attitudes, policies, and practices. She talks about tinkering around the edges—not fundamentally altering age stereotypes, bias, and discrimination, and she worries about the extension of existing patterns, delaying but not reimagining the lockstep life course.

This lack of envisioning is exactly what I witnessed in my meeting, and this book gave me new insights, new language, and new energy for understanding and acting on behalf of older adults—including myself—who require new contexts in which to live their longer lives. We must come to realize that a revamp of the institutional practices and regulations of our educational institution is less revolutionary than the demographic and longevity changes that we are now experiencing. Furthermore, it struck me that several people in the discussion were nearing normal retirement age—yet that still was not enough to shake us from the engrained visions of older age.

Dr. Moen proposes that a new phase of life, which she calls “encore adulthood,” is being realized. She argues that adulthood is being extended on both ends—at the early end, in emerging adulthood, and at the later end, in encore adulthood. She believes that emerging adults and encore adults have much in common, including living in a time of profound change, when the old prescriptions of what they should be doing, the paths they should be taking, do not work anymore. The conventional life course is being disrupted by economic, technological, and demographic changes. One of the main features of this disruption, as described by Dr. Moen, is the disappearing social contract between employers and employees. The norms related to full-time careers, job stability, defined benefit retirement plans, and full-time retirement are vanishing as digital and global economies, part-time and short-term project-specific jobs, and defined contribution savings options grow instead. Educational trajectories are also changing, as emerging adults engage in episodes of work, service, and school; just as encore adults find the need for more education and training as they manage their work and personal obligations. As Moen points out, both emerging and encore adults are left to find their paths as the old models disappear in this time of uncertainty and opportunity.

Moen argues that conventional adulthood is unravelling and that encore adulthood is emerging as a new stage before old age. She constructs this argument in three sections. In the first section, “Recognizing Inertia,” she focuses on current ideas about schooling, career paths, family care, age, gender, and retirement and how these ideas came about in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She further elucidates how demographic changes and the extended life course, in the context of a global economy and technological innovation, run up against these firmly established arrangements and inert policies. Older adults are living with realities that she describes in this first section—work-hour, life-course, and risk-safety net mismatches.

In the second section, “Time-shifting Improvisations,” Moen discusses how many of today’s older adults are creating their own personal solutions to these mismatches
of the outdated linear life course. She urges us to learn from and support baby boomers’ improvisations to alter timetables and clocks to meet their needs and preferences. In the last section, “Innovations,” she points out that there are examples of flexible, financially sustainable, and purposive options for work, learning, and civic engagement that fit with needs related to family responsibilities, health concerns, and finances. She reviews private and nonprofit sector examples of supporting longer and more varied lives.

Moen has succeeded in bringing together a wide range of information to develop her arguments. She brings in theories from many of the social sciences, including human development, psychology, and sociology. She uses her past and current research, including both quantitative and qualitative studies, and a broad base of existing literature. She weaves stories of people that she interviewed throughout the book and presents some new analyses from secondary data sources that she completed for this manuscript. She also connects in a very personal way to the ideas she presents. In sum, Moen brings together ideas that have been expressed over the last few decades and synthesizes them in a scholarly way that moves us closer to the articulation and acceptance of a new life stage that is emerging in response to longer lives.

I especially applaud Moen’s elucidation of the “elephants in the room.” I hear these concerns brought up a lot, especially by those outside of academic gerontology. For example, these new models further cater to the “greedy geezers” who have so much and want more for themselves; these new arrangements will create more competition with younger adults, especially in the workforce; these new policies will deny people what they have been working for—a traditional retirement, filled with leisure; and these new ideas discount the tough reality of old age, when health conditions eventually overtake our abilities and create the need for assistance. We must bring these elephants out of the corner and address them head on, accounting for what is true and conveying the reality of what is not.

I also appreciate that Moen is upfront with concerns about older adults who have lived with inequalities stemming from education, gender, race/ethnicity, and health conditions, as well as age. She continually challenges us to redesign our institutions with these people in mind and to reinvent safety nets for a less linear, more unpredictable life course.

However, we need to go further with these ideas than we have to date. For years, we have expressed concern that older adults who have been the most marginalized across the life course will continue to be marginalized, or even marginalized more, in this new period of life. The new global reality of growing inequality needs to be factored into analyses as much as the new economic, technological, and demographic times. This concern about people entering this new phase of adulthood with disadvantage accumulated across the life course relates to my elephant in the room: The word encore may not be right. Do not get me wrong—I love the term, I use it all the time, and I do not have a better one in mind. It captures much about this new period of life between conventional retirement and conventional old age, especially the potential for individual older adults and society at large. But, as the dictionary says, it refers to a repeat or additional performance. It derives from French and relates to the concepts of still and again. Too many older people do not want, do not need, cannot afford, or cannot make it still and again. They do not want an encore as much as a break or a restart. The term emerging adulthood, used to describe the early part of adulthood, works for me. Emerging is more objective, more neutral than encore. Encore is more aspirational and encore implies more of something good, something the audience wants.

Language continues to elude us as we talk about this phase of life that has never existed before, and Moen warns us that new language and new customs must emerge alongside of new programs and new policies. I have no doubt about the emergence of this phase of life that Dr. Moen describes. She is a pioneer, one of the foremost scholars, in helping us identify, understand, and shape this new period of life. I hope that she can get my “language elephant” out of the room.

In sum, I greatly admire what Phyllis Moen has accomplished in this volume. I think this work will have an impact on the way scholars think about the life course and the way professional advocates, policymakers, and practitioners respond to longer lives. Her work moves us away from outmoded models of work, education, and retirement and toward realizing the personal and social potentials of the distinct life stage of encore adulthood.

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