# CHALLENGES OF THE THIRD AGE

## Meaning and Purpose in Later Life

*Edited by*

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# Social Sources of Meaning in Later Life

*Richard A. Settersten, Jr.*

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION   Settersten approaches the issue of meaning in the Third Age by examining the extensive literature on the determinants of our values and our goals. There are, of course, many influences, but most important may be those we experience as we participate in our social worlds. We make sense to ourselves as we seek to make sense to others. We feel secure in our ability to make a difference as we witness our effectiveness. We also evaluate ourselves partly on the basis of others' evaluations of us. We are likely to lose confidence in ourselves should we see ourselves being treated as marginal and irrelevant.

Settersten considers how our connections to others give point to our daily existence throughout our lives. In the Third Age, as at other times of life, our dominant concerns are apt to be relational: we try to maintain our own emotional well-being through interaction with others, and we worry about the emotional well-being of those close to us. Yet our relationships are likely to undergo change. Siblings whose paths had, through adulthood, diverged from our own, become more a part of ongoing life. Our friendships change: we have fewer work-related friendships, perhaps fewer friendships overall, but a new appreciation of friendships of long standing. Our marital and familial relationships absorb more of our time and energy.

Our ability to act effectively as a person in the Third Age depends on the roles and responsibilities our social world makes available to us in our postretirement years. It also depends on the state of our physical, emotional, and social resources. If all goes well we will remain vital participants in the world around us, despite having moved on from the responsibilities of earlier life. If all does not go well, we will want at the very least to function independently. Many of us find intolerable the idea of becoming the responsibility of others, controlled by their routines and provided only with what they decide is good for us.

Rubinstein, in the preceding chapter, questioned the importance of life review in the Third Age. But even without full-scale life reviews, many of those in the Third Age will consider what their lives have been about. They may look back on a struggle for self-realization or on a series of challenges encountered and perhaps mastered. Some will see their lives to have been justified by achievements; others, by children; and still others will take pride in having lived lives during which, each day, they met that day's bills.

Most in the Third Age may not give a great deal of thought to what gives meaning to their lives. Nevertheless, the values and goals they express in their behavior, the things they have done that please them, and the activities they currently pursue together constitute a statement of what they find meaningful. As Settersten shows, many factors have gone into determining just what that is.

Questions about the purpose and meaning of human existence have been asked since the beginning of recorded history: What is the point in our being alive? And how can one live a life that is meaningful and fulfilling? A search for answers to these questions seems deeply rooted in human nature (see Wong & Fry, 1998).

The search for answers becomes particularly important in

later life. At this time, individuals may try to integrate their past and present experiences into a continuous, coherent, and meaningful life story that makes sense of the lives they have lived (Erikson, 1963). This task may become more urgent in the face of age-related declines and losses and the recognition that the end of life is approaching.

Personal goals and decisions are central to the creation of personal meaning, and the larger the goal or decision, the greater its influence (Little, 1998; Maddi, 1998). Of course, developmental goals are shaped by biological, psychological, and social capacities and constraints (Heckhausen, 1999; Settersten, 1999). These factors significantly reduce the range of potential options available to an individual at any given point in time; and they canalize (make more selective) the life course over time. This can be interpreted in positive or negative ways. On the one hand, the process of canalization, in restricting the number of possible developmental pathways, keeps the individual focused on specific tracks and may help to maximize his or her developmental gains (e.g., to reap the accumulated rewards of his or her skills and resources). On the other hand, constraints of these types, particularly those that are the result of social forces, might be considered negative, even oppressive, as entire classes of individuals are systematically denied certain opportunities or are placed onto negative pathways with little or no chance to leave them.

Meaning in later life must be considered from the vantage points of both human agency and social structure. It must consider the degree to which individuals actively create their own lives through the goals they set and the effort they expend to reach them. At the same time, it must consider the degree to which individuals' lives are determined by their place in the social structure. The circumstances in which individuals find themselves are not entirely of their own doing: processes of social selection sift and sort people into and out of various

contexts (Clausen, 1995). Such factors can constrain or promote opportunities in powerful ways.

The task of understanding meaning in later life is important and difficult. A variety of frames of reference must be invoked, including those of the psychologist and sociologist, the theologian, and the people whose outlook we hope to understand. We need to learn what leads to lives that feel vital, realized, and meaningful or lives that feel empty and pointless. Only with such understanding can we evaluate the human worth of the economic, medical, scientific, and social successes that have led to our increased life spans.

## Distant Social Contexts as Sources of Meaning

### Culture

Culture structures the ways lives are lived, represented, and assigned meanings. Project A. G. E. (Age, Generation, and Experience) is the only study of which I am aware that has undertaken explicit comparisons of cultural frameworks that relate to the experience of old age. It has explored the meanings of aging within seven communities in four countries: Hong Kong, China; Swarthmore, Pennsylvania; Momence, Illinois; Blessington, Ireland; Clifden, Ireland; the Herero of Botswana; and the !Kung Bushmen of Botswana (Keith et al., 1994). In each site the investigators asked what age categories were used and how the categories were defined and expressed. They also asked how age categories were evaluated, how people of different ages were expected to participate socially, and how people of different ages actually did participate.

People in all seven sites found old age to be the least desirable time in life. The sites in the United States and Ireland re-

ported the least negative reactions to old age, especially from older people themselves. However, responses were generally hedged by an important "If": "If you have your health." The most negative reactions to old age were found in the two African sites, presumably because life in those communities is significantly tied to health and vigor and aging regularly brings loss in physical abilities. Health status, along with material security, was everywhere thought to be the most important determinant of the quality of later life.

These findings are consistent with other research that shows that older people's perceptions of their health and the health of others affects how they understand the process of aging (e.g., Eisenhandler, 1989). Concerns about health and health-related statuses begin to emerge at midlife but become increasingly important for self-definition in the later years (Freund & Smith, 1997). Most older people hope and try to maintain their health. For many, growing old is defined by, and is a process of adapting to, declines in physical health. They do not feel old unless they are physically ill or depressed. This feeling may be exacerbated in cultures that strongly disparage dependence in old age. An older adult who can no longer control his or her bodily functioning is likely to be demoted to the status of "nonperson," a status often shared with children (Hockey & James, 1993).

In Project A.G.E., concerns about dependence and independence in old age were often expressed in Hong Kong, in the United States, and among the Herero. For Americans, being dependent on others was one of the worst of the changes that may come with old age. For the Chinese and Herero, on the other hand, dependence on others was one of the potentially good things about old age. For the Herero, one of the best things about being young is having responsibility for the care of elders.

Project A.G.E. found significant variation in the extent to which age is a basis for social separation. The American sites and the !Kung Bushman site constituted extremes. Among the !Kung it was difficult to find any situation in which people of only one age category were present. Instead, "people of all ages worked, rested, played, and ate together—often touching and leaning on each other" (Keith, 1994, p. 210). On the other hand, in the United States, and especially in the Swarthmore site, age defined many tight social boundaries, with "fine age distinctions" sorting people into age-graded social contexts.

Though its degree varies, an age-differentiated life course is common in most modern societies (Keith et al., 1994; Riley & Riley, 1994; Settersten, 1997). In an age-differentiated life course, social roles and activities are allocated on the basis of age or life stage. In what has been called the "tripartition of the life course" (Kohli, 1986), the life course is rigidly segmented into three separate periods of education, work, and leisure. This model takes work to be the central dimension that organizes life. As Matilda Riley and John Riley (1994) note, such a structure is convenient in that it creates orderliness in the entry into important social roles and activities and also in the exit from them. At the same time, however, a rigid tripartite structure restricts opportunities for various types of activity to specific periods of life. It may be that a society would use the talents of its population most effectively if it softened or even departed from such a structure, so that within it everyone, of every age, could participate in the mix of education, work, and leisure that was most suitable and desirable.

*Cohort*

Cohort experiences —those experiences shared by members of a society who are born more or less in the same year—may

well contribute unique understandings to the nature of aging. The kinds of opportunities and expectations individuals have in all areas of their lives are conditioned by the times in which they live. These historical conditions therefore shape and set the parameters of life's meanings. In the United States, contemporary cohorts of older adults have witnessed both rapid and dramatic social change in their lifetimes. The elders of our time have experienced the Great Depression, World War II, postwar economic growth, the Korean War and the McCarthy era, dramatic changes in transportation and technology, the overthrow of political regimes, new recognition of civil rights, and fundamental transformations of sexual mores. The very oldest have lived through World War I and knew a time when women had no legal right to vote.

We also know that contemporary cohorts of older adults place great value on their religious and spiritual beliefs and exhibit high levels of religious and spiritual activity (McFadden, 1996). Indeed, Paul Wong (1998) has noted that current cohorts of older people find in religion a major source of meaning. Indeed, their churches may be their most important sources of support, other than their families (Koenig, Smiley, & Gonzales, 1988). For future cohorts, however, the importance of religion and religious institutions seems uncertain. It may be that individuals become more religious and spiritual as they age, moving away from the more materialistic and pragmatic outlook of their earlier lives toward an outlook that is more cosmic and transcendent (Tornstam, 1997). But it also may be that the high degree of religiosity and spirituality now evidenced among older people will be true only for this cohort. This cohort may have lived during a time now passing, in which religion was highly valued and individuals and families exhibited a high rate of participation in religious institutions. In any event, religious and spiritual activities and

beliefs serve to create meaning and purpose in life (McFadden, 1996, p. 172).

Still, while contemporary elders encountered a common set of historical events and periods of social change, we cannot assume that their actual experiences were the same. Within the current cohort of older people there is significant variability across finer cohort divisions. The youngest were infants or toddlers at the onset of the Great Depression, while the oldest were in their late twenties or early thirties. Similarly, the youngest were too young to have served in the armed forces during World War II, while those even somewhat older may well have had significant military experience. In addition, even those who share precisely the same birth year may have had different experiences depending on sex, race, the social class of their family of origin, the region of the country in which they lived, and the values and belief systems of their families.

*Demographic Change*

Historical shifts in the key demographic parameters—particularly mortality, morbidity, and fertility—have created new "time budgets of adulthood," to use Gunhild Hagestad's (1990) phrase. These, too, affect life's meanings. We now have more, and healthier, years to spend in various roles and activities. As a result, roles and activities may be prolonged and their time schedules loosened. The sequencing of roles and activities may become more varied, and their structure may become more complex. The result may be a more flexible life course (Riley, 1985; Settersten & Lovegreen, 1998; Sørensen, 1991) in which age is less important in determining social roles and life experiences.

There has been much speculation about the way changes in demographic parameters may affect a society. For example,

Alice Rossi (1986) has argued that an aging population, because it is heavily female, brings the potential for a more humane and caring society. This argument, however, assumes that (1) as the age pyramid becomes more top-heavy, the values and concerns of older women will play a larger role in social thought, (2) the values and concerns of older women are more or less uniform, and (3) women's values are naturally more humane and caring than those of men. Other speculation emphasizes the new potentials associated with increased lifetime, including the possibility that individuals not only will arrive at old age feeling more fulfilled but will live their later years in more satisfying and meaningful ways. However, increased life expectancy may bring with it challenges and even problems for individuals, families, social institutions, and society at large. Bernice Neugarten (1995) has speculated about the costs of survivorship for those individuals who outlive spouses or partners, siblings, friends, and even children. Are their later years therefore destined to be lonely ones? Another question is the extent to which frailty and disability may mark the additional years of life. Have we added years to life without adding life to those years? There have been debates about the personal and social costs that may accompany gains in life expectancy and the larger numbers of older people that will result. These include controversies surrounding proposals to ration expensive life-saving medical procedures as a function of age (e.g., Callahan, 1987) and to reallocate government funds away from old-age programs and services and toward those that pertain to children (e.g., Preston, 1984).

I have thus far focused on rather distant social contexts as sources of meaning in the later years. I now turn to the more proximate social contexts in which central life experiences take place, such as family life, friendships and their networks, work, school, neighborhood, and the informal associations associated with leisure activities and volunteering.

## Proximate Social Contexts
## as Sources of Meaning

### Work and Education

An individual's adjustment to the end of the work role will largely depend on whether work held much meaning before retirement. As John Kelly (1993) notes, identities of ability and worth persist even after the ending of actual work. Still, to the extent that the retired person's identity is tied to actually working, retirement may present a challenge (Gradman, 1994).

Most contemporary research suggests that by and large men make the transition to retirement without unhappiness or maladjustment (e.g., Reitzes, Mutran, & Fernandez, 1996). For women, the evidence is less clear, perhaps because it is often illness of the spouse or the self that encourages retirement (Szinovacz & Washo, 1992) or because retirement diminishes financial security, especially for women who are on their own (Guy & Erdner, 1993).

Many working adults indicate that they hope to continue to work beyond the usual retirement age, and many retired adults indicate that they would like to work and are capable of doing so (McNaught, Barth, & Henderson, 1991; Quinn & Burkhauser, 1994). Nevertheless, the last few decades have brought a worldwide shift toward earlier and earlier retirement (Kohli, 1994). Although some evidence suggests that these trends are now beginning to taper off (Burkhauser & Quinn, 1994), most workers, young and old, want to retain the option of retiring at the age now usual in their occupations (Rix, 1998). However, many find value in alternatives to moving directly from work to full retirement, such as bridge jobs, part-time work, and limited-time returns to work during retirement.

Some older people have replaced the structure and engagement of work with participation in adult educational programs oriented toward the older learner (Manheimer, 1998;

Manheimer, Snodgrass, & Moskow-McKenzie, 1995). Such programs are administered through senior centers, extension schools, vocational schools, community colleges, and four-year colleges and universities and may include students in teaching, institutional governance, and the development of curricula. Programs such as these not only increase the potential for "life-long learning" but also make it possible for individuals to resume and achieve educational or occupational goals they were not able to meet earlier in their lives.

*Leisure and Volunteer Activity*

The activities in which individuals are engaged constitute something more than simply "keeping busy"; they often express and reflect one's central values and hold important meanings (Kaufman, 1993). Volunteer activities, in particular, have been found to bring new meaning to the lives of men and women at midlife and beyond by permitting them not only to perform useful services but also to function as mentors, guides, and repositories of experience for those who are younger (Kleiber & Ray, 1993). Engaging in productive leisure activities also facilitates older people's well-being (Herzog, Franks, Markus, & Holmberg, 1998).

More than a quarter of older Americans perform volunteer work (Caro & Bass, 1995), and even more would do so if they had the opportunity (Cutler & Hendricks, 1990). The volunteer work is primarily done for religious institutions and organizations but also for hospitals, nursing homes, and hospice organizations. Participation in advocacy organizations, including political organizations, also serves as an important source of meaning in later life. The fact that older people display high voting rates is an expression of the importance to them of political developments (Binstock & Day, 1996; Torres-Gil, 1992; Wallace, Williamson, Lung, & Powell, 1991).

It seems to be the younger and healthier among the elderly who are most likely to participate in satisfying leisure activities (Johnson & Barer, 1992). Those who are older and less healthy are more likely to disengage from the wider social sphere of advocacy and volunteering and to move to a world of much-reduced scope. Still, among those who disengage to a world in which introspection in good part replaces social engagement, many seem content simply to take their lives day by day.

*Personal Relationships*

No one moves through life alone. An individual life is intimately connected to the lives of many others, and an individual's development is bound to, and shaped by, interaction with others (Elder, 1998; Settersten, 1999). Intimate ties in later life, like those earlier in life, shape one's experiences and life's meanings. Interdependence can affect decision-making. People whose lives are linked generally attempt to navigate life together; for example, husbands and wives may jointly coordinate the timing of their respective retirements so that they can spend more time together.

At the same time, interdependence can bring with it great unpredictability, in that a change in the life of one person requires adjustment in the lives of others, thereby creating asynchrony. When lives are asynchronous, relationships may be strained. For example, the serious illness of a parent, spouse, or child may create an unexpected need to provide care, may require immediate accommodations in work and other activities, or may even bring the need to revise one's life plans.

Research has most often considered the consequences of interdependence in the first half of life. For example, research has examined the emotional and financial interdependence between parents and young children. Research has also studied the interdependence of married couples and the relative sacrifi-

ces of each member in the realms of family and work. We know much less about the sources and nature of interdependence in later life. The most frequent opinion found in the literature is that relationships in later life are largely enabling, supportive, and essential to well-being. Yet, as noted earlier, we must not forget that the interdependence of lives can also reduce and even foreclose options and that relationships can be burdensome as well as supportive. Nonetheless, we know that loss of close relationships can be devastating to people of any age and that support from other close relationships contributes to the maintenance of a sense that life is meaningful (Rosowsky, 1995). Beyond this, however, we have much to learn about the ways interdependence facilitates meaning in the lives of older people.

As individuals grow older, they change positions in the family structure and with these changes assume new identities, roles, and responsibilities. The nature of relationships with partners, children, and grandchildren may need to be renegotiated over time. The transition to retirement may increase the amount of time that spouses, children, and grandchildren can spend together. Similarly, increased longevity carries the potential for closer family relationships, as family members come to know each other for longer periods of time. Ordinarily these are positive changes, but they may also lead to "long-term lousy relationships" of conflict and even abandonment (Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1996, p. 269; Suitor, Pillemer, Keeton, & Robison, 1995; Thomas, 1996b).

The provision of care for the elderly may also create significant challenges for family life. The coupling of increased lifetime with diminished fertility implies that older people may need care for longer periods, but there will be fewer children to provide it. The geographical mobility of children may further attenuate the familial support system available to the elderly. Furthermore, some among the elderly will be childless, most because they never had children, some because they out-

lived their children (Jerrome, 1996). Where the elderly are in need of care that is not easily available, what may become most meaningful in their lives is simply getting through the day.

We know little as yet about the implications for caregiving of family forms in which the families are based on second marriages or unmarried partnerships. For example, gay and lesbian couples may face special challenges as they age, including making their sexual situations known to health care providers and obtaining insurance in which the partner is the beneficiary (Huyck, 1995; Thomas, 1996a). It may be that today's greater acceptance of gay men and lesbian women will reduce some of these problems. (See, for two case studies, Cohler and Hostetler, this volume.)

Family relationships themselves change as people move into later life. Reduced work and parental responsibilities make possible increases in marital companionship and, often, increases in marital satisfaction (Lee, 1988; Orbuch, House, Mero, & Webster, 1996). Sibling relationships can become more important in later life, especially for women and for men who are single, divorced, widowed, or childless (Connidis, 1994; Wilson, Calsyn, & Orlofsky, 1994). But of special importance to the meaning of later life is the role of grandparent (Thompson, 1993). Grandparenting provides a vehicle for personal growth for both men and women (Thomas, 1994). For many men, grandfatherhood represents an opportunity to express a more nurturing self (Gutmann, 1987) and to compensate for having spent what they, in retrospect, feel was too little time with their own children.

Older people's friendships, like friendships earlier in life, can stem from different settings, take different forms, and fulfill different functions. They are therefore meaningful in very different ways. Older people are likely to have long-term, perhaps lifetime friendships, more recently formed friendships based on work associations or neighboring relationships, and

quite short-term friendships based on their current situations. Although some friendships, especially those based on proximity, may be mostly given to exchanges of favors and information, friendships are matters of choice, provide companionship and fun, and, should they become nonsupportive, can be ended (e.g., Field, 1997; Lee & Shehan, 1989). Longstanding friendships in which there are both strong emotional bonds and similarities in values and status tend to provide great satisfaction to older adults (Litwak, 1989; Sperry & Wolfe, 1996). One of the costs imposed by the ill health and frailty that often occurs in the final years of life is a much-restricted friendship network.

Within the family, older women are likely to function as "kinkeepers" (Hagestad, 1986), integrating and fostering family relationships across generations until, upon reaching advanced old age, they turn the role over to daughters (Troll & Bengtson, 1992). Most older women experience widowhood (Uhlenberg, 1980), and women comprise the bulk of the older population. For this reason, and because women may all their lives have maintained relationships with other women, most of the relationships of older women are likely to be with other women.

Older men seem to have more women in their friendship networks than older women have men (Adams, 1994). They are less likely to be widowed than are older women and may be more dependent on their marriages for social integration. They are less likely than women to have become accustomed to confiding in friends (Adams, 1994). If they should become widowed and be without sisters or daughters, they may be at risk of social isolation (Hatch & Bulcroft, 1992).


Residence and Community

There are many benefits to "aging in place" (Fogel, 1993). Remaining at home preserves neighborhood-based social rela-

tionships. It facilitates continuing independence and, with it, privacy and control of one's life. There are all the benefits of familiarity. Possessions of sentimental value are retained. The environment that has long sustained one's identity remains present and intact. Yet many elders are required to relocate to new environments because of diminished physical or mental health or dwindling resources. The 1990 census shows that one person in twenty over the age of sixty-five, and fully one person in four over the age of eighty-five, lives in a nursing home. Significant numbers also live in government-subsidized housing or board-and-care homes (Pynoos & Golant, 1996).

Residential change of any kind is difficult for older people. It generally involves separation from family and friends. True, under some circumstances, where people go from a bad situation to better one, residential change can positively affect well-being (Emmons, Colby, & Kaiser, 1998; Kling, Seltzer, & Ryff, 1997). However, it is not uncommon for institutional settings to restrict the type or amount of personal belongings a new resident may bring, to define appropriate styles of dress for residents, and to set rules around visiting, socializing, and even sexual activity. Taking all things together, there is much to be said for providing older people with the resources they need as long as they can reasonably hope to remain in their own homes. These resources may include the support of family members, social services, and help with home modifications and repairs (see Callahan, 1993).

Conclusion

The most pervasive discomfort in later life may not be fear of destitution or even fear of poor health but rather an awareness, perhaps unverbalized, that without obligation life can become empty of meaning; boredom or depression may appear as an

accompaniment to loss of purpose or usefulness (Stevens, 1993: Thompson, 1993). Most older adults want to feel that their later years will be as rich in experience and engagement as were their earlier years and that declining health and energy, should they happen, will make for selection among activities rather than disengagement from life. Yet people have to find their own ways to purpose and usefulness: the period of later life is largely without models or pattern. How do people manage?

The framework offered early in this chapter emphasized the need to understand the ways that experiences and meanings are actively created within the confines of biological, psychological, and social constraints. Nevertheless, absent from contemporary scholarship on aging is a conception of the structural sources of experience: the activities and interpretations of activities imposed by schools, workplaces, nursing homes and medical institutions, families and friendship groups, communities, and society at large. This chapter has only begun to explore some of these sources, separating those factors distant from the individual, such as culture, cohort, and demography, from those more proximate, such as family relationships and friendships, leisure and social participation, residence, work and retirement, and education. I have also considered some of the processes within these contexts that set parameters for the experiences and meanings of later life. Finally, I have speculated about the opportunities and barriers to meaningful experiences that exist in these settings.

Following the recent work by the MacArthur Foundation's research network on successful adolescent development (e.g., Jessor, 1993), gerontologists might begin to explore what constitutes a good or bad context for older people, and why and for whom particular contexts matter. We should not assume that everyone would find any given context to be positive or negative or that the worth of a context is easily measured.

However, discussion of the influence of contexts has pushed scholars to more carefully consider the ways that people are shaped by the worlds within which they live.

The comparative freedom from obligation found in later life can foster people's creative exploration of meaningful activity within the limits imposed by their settings, but it can also permit people to continue to live as they always have, though perhaps now at a more leisurely pace and without work or parental responsibilities to structure their time. Or, a third alternative, freedom from obligation can give rise to anomie, boredom, and a sense of pointlessness. We as a society are just now recognizing this issue. The ongoing research described in this chapter, together with the reports of people themselves in later life, may help make for socially and individually meaningful utilization of later life's opportunities.

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# Epilogue: Concluding Note on Meaning and the Possibility of Productive Aging

*Robert S. Weiss and Scott A. Bass*

Issues of meaning are important throughout life but may well be problematic only for the young and the old. Adolescents, not yet decided on their lifework or whether, let alone who, they will marry, can obsess both alone and in bull sessions with peers about the direction their lives will take. Once adult responsibilities are assumed, people seem to go on automatic pilot, except for those intervals of midlife crisis when the point of it all may be reconsidered. In later life, with occupational and familial tasks completed, grand questions of the meaning of life again have personal relevance. There is again opportunity, if not need, to ask, "What is it all about?"

One of the discoveries made by many in later life is how much it matters to them that they matter to others. They find, sometimes to their surprise, that the marginality that accompanies retirement makes them uncertain of their worth. Their past success provides inadequate support for their current self-esteem. Their earlier feelings of worth proved unbankable. The comment is sometimes made by retired people who had achieved some prominence in their occupations: "I've gone from who's who to who's he?"

Others, however, appear indifferent to no longer counting in the world of their work. They find meaning in the routines of family life and in the gratifying and broadening experiences of voluntary activity, travel, and participation in programs of instruction. Their lives seem adequately meaningful despite only limited responsibilities.

What does it mean to experience one's life as meaningful? It means something different from having goals. The goal of fixing up a summer place so it can serve as a year-round residence can occupy thought and energy yet not be enough to make one feel that one's life still matters. And a life of retreat, perhaps associated with a religious order, can be meaningful even without evident personal goals. Having meaning in life has to do with feeling that one still matters, to oneself at least, and that what one does makes sense. It has to do with the conviction that one's life is about something more than simply surviving.

Sociologists sometimes divide up the activities engaged in by organizations into those that are required to keep the organization going and those that advance the organization's program. The same categorization can be made of people's activities. Much of later life is given to maintenance activities, to staying healthy and alert. But for most people it would seem that for life to be meaningful there has to be something more: an emotional investment, a commitment.

From our earliest days as functioning humans we want to engage with the world around us. As Marris points out in his chapter, we begin with a readiness, and a need, to maintain the close relationships that bring with them feelings of security. But once those relationships are in place, we want to explore and to encounter and master challenge. We want to make a difference in the world around us. That drive to engage with the world and to make a difference in it is at the core

of children's play and adults' work. The drive to engage persists, for most of us, into the Third Age and beyond.

Our society provides few hints regarding how engagement might be managed in the Third Age. We may no longer picture those retired from work as miserly or dotty, or as curmudgeons or dependents. But the new images of the aged—the carefree tourist, the golfer, the benign but essentially unburdened grandparent—are equally without social concern. Rubinstein, in his chapter, points out that the concept of a "Third Age" is, among other things, an effort to redefine the postretirement phase of life as one of opportunity for self-expression rather than bitter or addled self-protection. But the new social expectation is like the expectation that preceded it in that it assumes a later life without vital involvement in the social world. Indeed, elders may be told that their separation from the labor force has been earned through their years of work, as though social irrelevance is an appropriate reward for a career's contributions.

American institutions and businesses that are designed specifically for the elderly encourage the perception that the elderly have entered into an endless vacation. Guttman's discussion of the functioning of older men in Druse society suggests what might be an alternative. Although a society that honors older men but not older women is an imperfect model, Druse society provides at least its older men with valued, respected roles. These roles honor the experience and maturity that comes with age. Here is a social institution that meets genuine needs of its society by using the abilities distinct to the able aged, which include not only wisdom based on experience but also time freed from the demands of parenthood and labor.

Insofar as we in this country see elders engaged with our social institutions, it is as consumers. Our institutions include programs such as Elderhostel that provide cultural, educa-

tional, and travel opportunities for the active elderly; senior centers with sometimes extensive menus of social and cultural activities; college programs in which seniors can pursue learning without sitting for examinations; and such activities for the elderly as golf clubs, bridge clubs, crafts programs, and classes in which seniors are coached in writing or in the arts. In any of these programs the older person may well find self-enrichment but little opportunity for contributing to others in ways that matter.

This is not to say that we in this country have no models at all for what might be a vital, productive later life. However, our models are of exceptional people. We have biographies of eminent men and women who maintained their effectiveness to an advanced age: Oliver Wendell Holmes and Susan B. Anthony are two among many. And we have popular books that describe men and women in later life who would still be seen as unusual if their ages were halved: they direct large enterprises or undertake adventuresome travel or are successful writers and poets or participate actively in sport. People who are more nearly ordinary may find inspiration in such accounts but are unlikely to find guidance. They will lack the prerequisites of already established social position, wealth, talent, or skill that these exceptional people have.

Can Americans, despite limited, or absent, institutional support, find meaning in later life? Many find satisfaction in daily activities—which is not the same as meaning—but they also, often, find a way of contributing to others in their social worlds, of continuing to make a difference. Cohler and Hostetler, in their chapter, describe the lives of two men without children, one living in a distinctly nontraditional but highly stable intimate partnership, the other living more or less alone, though again in a nontraditional lifestyle, each content with life, vital, and engaged. Each continues to contribute energy to the functioning of his community and to accept re-

sponsibility for people to whom he is close. Each appears to find meaning in this way of life.

The existentialist writer Albert Camus suggested that people could count their lives meaningful to the extent that they had been engaged in the struggles of their time and place. It is, of course, too grand an expectation for most of us that we measure ourselves by our contribution to the larger struggles of our time: the amelioration of poverty, the settling of peoples, the reduction of ethnic strife, the taming of the scourges of illness and disability, the extension of understanding. Enough, for most of us, that we have participated fully and honestly in the smaller struggles of life: that we have done constructive work, have raised a family, and have been faithful to those who depended on us. Enough, for most of us, that we have tried, and continue to try, to fashion a better society in the milieu within which we live.

Moody, in his chapter in this book, notes that both Erikson and Jung proposed that the meaningfulness of a life is to be found in its continuing fidelity to core values. In Erikson's formulation, the well-being of the aged required first that they have met the test of generativity, which might be phrased as contributing to the repair and progress of their society. It would then require that they have met the test of integrity. Integrity is a more difficult concept. It suggests being all of a piece, youth and maturity, values and actions. It also suggests the ability to review one's one and only life and conclude that it had point and coherence and was good enough.

Any number of factors play a role in deciding whether a particular person can achieve any of this. In this book Settersten reviews the extensive research that has been done on what produces the particular meanings given to later life and what makes it easier or more difficult to express those meanings. He shows that factors include, most broadly, the messages carried by people's society and culture about what is to be expected of

them at various points in their lives and also the social positions that provide some opportunities and close off others. Familial and occupational relationships encourage only certain ways of understanding what life is about. They are needed sources of support, but they can also be sources of constraint. Still, as Rowles and Ravdal show, people do best where there is continuity of physical and social contexts, and even constraints can help sustain direction.

What advice might be offered to those entering the Third Age? How should they ensure that their lives continue to be meaningful? We might begin by noting that we must concern ourselves both with goals and with process. Goals are the point of it all, the achievement to which energy is devoted. The activities of later life can be meaningful only as they contribute to valued ends: making life better for grandchildren, helping a church to function, relieving the distress of the ill, or raising money for a cause. But meaningfulness also resides in the processes through which goals are sought. A meaningful activity would be one that captures a person's energies so that the person is entirely engaged by it. It would provide Csikszentmihalyi's "flow," in which the actor is so immersed in the activity that self-awareness is lost.

That goals and process are necessary to each other is made evident in the autobiographical reports of Morris and Dobrof. Each pursued careers aimed at bettering the world, and each found that their efforts were absorbing and gratifying. Our advice to the person entering the Third Age would be, then, not only to get involved but to get involved with an enterprise that matters to you.

Where might one find an enterprise that matters? A first thought is to return attention to the world of work, the world that was left on entrance into the Third Age. It is here that meaningful activity is likely to have been found earlier in life; it

is most likely to be here that meaningful activity can continue to be found.

The older person may well have something unique to offer. Rather like the older Druse man, the older person can provide continuity to an enterprise. To be sure, in many fields technical obsolescence is an inescapable accompaniment of seniority. Yet those who have had long experience in a field are likely to have a repertoire of still applicable problem-solving approaches that constitutes a kind of usable wisdom. Further, older people, more than the young, are attracted by flexible hours and part-time work and can provide employers with a kind of reserve labor force available to be tapped as needed.

A growing body of literature discusses the benefits of "productive aging," by which is meant aging in which the elderly remain engaged in activities of social worth, whether these are paid or not (e.g., Bass, Caro, & Chen, 1993). Productive aging can be seen as an approach to a meaningful later life that emphasizes continued constructive functioning in the society. Yet, as Matilda White Riley has observed, the social institutions of our society often lag behind changes in the life experience or the values of its members (e.g., Riley, Kahn, & Foner, 1994). We are in need of institutions that would provide opportunities for some of our elderly to continue to play valid and valued roles in our society.

Many people in their sixties and seventies who no longer need to work, and may indeed have been encouraged by both their firms and their families not to work, and who are no longer responsible for raising children, are in other ways little changed from the responsible figures they had been a decade or two earlier. Many of them would value opportunities to continue to use their skills and energies productively.

There are, of course, others in the Third Age for whom social irrelevance is fine. They may always have made family the

center of their lives, and spending time with family is now enough for them. Or earlier in their lives they found both gratification and meaning in the competition and camaraderie of golf or bridge, and continue to do so. But for many in the Third Age, continuity requires being needed and valued by others for social contribution. Without opportunity for social contribution, they can feel themselves to be wasting their skills and energies and betraying their very selves. As some of them put it, they are not ready for the shelf.

A kind of logic can be discerned in our society's absence of interest in the possible contributions of the elderly. The amazing gains in productivity brought about by an educated, motivated workforce, augmented by automation, robotics, and the other developments of computers, have led to a situation in which there may seem to be no need for the contributions that could be made by the elderly. If our society really must deal with a surplus of workers, it can seem to make sense for those of retirement years to only tend to their families, their hobbies, their trips, and themselves and leave to younger people the work that must be done.

Yet our society can ill afford to send into comfortable exile its veteran managers and professionals and craftsmen. By doing so our society loses the people who carry in their minds the histories of their fields, the concerns of earlier practitioners, and the developments of practice, goals, and ethics they have witnessed in their careers. It loses the people who can bring perspective to those preoccupied with the problems of the moment and who can tell them, in response to many particular problems, what has been tried and what has failed.

Certainly, many of those in the Third Age would themselves be best served by continuing to contribute to the enterprises that mattered to them during their work lives. It would undoubtedly make sense to them that their contribution should be different from what it had been earlier, that they should

function as consultants rather than operatives, that they should be on call or available only part-time rather than obligated to a daily commute. But if their contribution were truly valuable, they would have a valid basis for the respect of others, for self-respect, and for a sense that they continued to matter. They would be elders in a community that for most continues to matter deeply, the community of their lifelong work.

As has been noted, not everyone in the Third Age will want to remain engaged with the world of their former work or to commit themselves to "productive aging." On the contrary, they may find most gratifying a later life in which they are relieved of the responsibilities they once carried. We must respect the different ways people will want to use their years in the Third Age and, in particular, recognize and respect those for whom an attraction of the Third Age is its potential for freedom from all obligation.

However, our society needs greater recognition than now exists of the experience, knowledge, and skills that those entering the Third Age are taking with them. For the sake of all of us, our industry and our other institutions should provide opportunities for useful and responsible positions to those in the Third Age for whom meaningfulness requires that they continue to make a difference.

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