

## An Historical Perspective on the Psychology of Aging by Rabon Delmore Saip, M.A.

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This is a more thorough, lengthy presentation than that given before the Area Agency on Aging Advisory Counsel for the August 2012 training, but/and contains all the same information.

Good Morning, The text on the screen is one of my personal cards, a message I try to spread wherever I can. Lets take a moment to read it.

“When we resist aging, we resist life itself, since aging is inherent in living. To resist the reality of aging creates needless suffering. But, if we can see the aging process as an unfolding opportunity, as a way to gain deeper wisdom by discriminating external phenomena from internal reality; then we can open to the fullness of life and the experience of Conscious Aging.”

From my studies I have learned that In order to better understand current phenomena such as Internalized Ageism, or the Longevity Revolution, it helps to look at patterns of the past. This world did not recently emerge one morning, full blown, just as we see it today. We are each a product of history, of a stunningly complex interweaving of valences so intricate, and yet so fundamental to our existence, we don't even know they are there.

Most of our assumptions about aging are so enculturated and embedded in our subconscious, we tend to accept them as truth, without question; however, if we are to deal with the challenges of the next few decades, we must also learn to challenge our assumptions and change our way of thinking. Although he said it

many decades ago, I think Winston Churchill was timeless with this statement.

“We are changing the world faster than we can change ourselves, and applying to the present the habits of the past.”

Put another way by the great Eienstein, and I grossly paraphrase: You cannot solve today’s problems with yesterday’s thinking.

Now, please join with me in giving some thought to this statement.

“Aging is universally experienced - without regard to race, class, income, education, religion, or gender - yet for the most part, it is experienced in isolation.”

Why do you suppose this is so? Why should something we all have in common be experienced in isolation? What’s up with that? And here again:

“Most all of us want to live long enough to become old, but hardly anyone wants to BE old. We have added years to our lives, but struggle in our ability to add life to the years we have gained. Aging well from a psychological point of view lags far behind the increase we have made in sheer biological longevity.”

It seems that something is out of synch here, doesn’t it? Why does the psychological lag behind the biological? How can this gap be explained? Here, in the terse academic language of a sociology professor, published in 1963 (one of the most boring books I have ever tried to read), is a rather arcane, but amazingly accurate, historical answer.

“The increasing longevity of all classes in post industrial societies has disrupted the centuries old synchronization between the temporal order of social systems and the temporal order of

biological man.”

- Man Time and Society by Wilbert E. Moore – 1963

An academic mouthful to be sure. But when you take it apart, he’s actually saying a great deal in just a few words. If I may elaborate. The Longevity Revolution we are experiencing today actually began in the 1830s and 40s during the early Industrial Revolution.

At that time, horrific living conditions for workers, lack of sanitation or clean drinking water, 12 to 18 hour work days; over half the babies being born in those filthy factory cities and towns were dying in infancy.

Wealthy industrialist high society reacted with an overtly conscientious, but completely rational business decision - to clean up the cities, stop the spread of disease and wage a properly benevolent campaign to “save the babies,” thus giving birth to public Health and the Longevity Revolution.

The result of so many working class individuals living longer gradually led to a disconnect between their commonly accepted life-frames, established over the centuries, and actual life-frames as many more began to outlive those historic life-times.

Although he didn’t have all the facts in 1963, this is what sociologist Wilbert E. Moore was leading to: As an eventual consequence of public health practices begun with the Industrial Revolution, **life expectancy increased more in one century, the 20th century, than in all the preceding 5000 years.** How truly profound is that? It’s almost impossible to say how huge the change we are living through today.

Now, at this point I’d like to take us even further back in time to another, but less known longevity revolution; one that took place many thousands of years ago. I think of it as mankind’s first

longevity revolution; one that is at the core of the following statement.

“We do not have elders because we have a human gift and modern capacity for keeping the weak alive; indeed, we are human because we have elders.”

- Anthropologist David Guttman

When I first read this, I didn't really understand its full significance, until I learned more about the evolution of modern homo sapiens. What I discovered is that aging is actually a fairly recent phenomenon in the course of human evolution.

“Increased longevity in the Upper Paleolithic (40,000 to 10,000 years ago) was dramatic, with old to young ratios five times greater than those seen in the Middle Paleolithic (200,000 to 40,000 years ago).” (ibid below)

We see here that there were five times more people living longer during this period. And although today's longevity revolution is happening much faster, I wonder how it will compare in terms of cultural impact.

“Dental age estimates, based on wear serration, were used to place specimens into categories of older or younger adults – older or younger than 30 years and above.”

- Rachel Caspari – Dept. of Anthropology, University of Michigan  
Sang-Hee Lee – Dept. of Anthropology, University of California

People over 30 were apparently less common before then. But why? Why did this increasing age wave begin to happen just then? Modern Homo Sapiens had been around for over a hundred thousand years, why the relatively sudden increase in longevity? Something was going on, but what? And then I discovered Gramma.

Perhaps you have heard of the Grandmother Hypothesis, a theory that explains the existence of menopause in our human life history. Because menopause is contrary to evolutionary theory, it has puzzled anthropologists for a long time. And yet, since it is a part of us, it must have served human evolution in some way; but how, how could an infertile period of up to one third of a woman's lifetime bestow any evolutionary advantage on our species?

“Human females have menopause because their hominid ancestors who ceased reproducing before the end of their lives gained a fitness advantage over their still-fertile sisters.” (ibid as below)

Older women had less chance of surviving childbirth, or their offspring of surviving older mothers.

“With no young children of their own, post-menopausal women helped to feed their daughter’s and niece’s children, thereby enhancing the reproductive success of existing progeny.”

- Jocelyn Scott Peccei, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Los Angeles

This allowed the younger women to have more babies. This theory was oddly emphasized when I encountered this unusual bit of research. I learned that pilot whales, killer whales and human beings are the only species who become infertile at mid-life.

Pilot Whales, Killer Whales & the Mystery of Human Menopause - ScienceDaily (07/02/10)

“Despite very different social structures between the three species, research shows that in each case females become increasingly genetically related to those they live with as they get older.”

So whatever the species, the children of daughter’s and niece’s are Grandma’s direct descendants - they carry her genes.

“Because of this, there is motivation for older females to do what is best for the survival of those around them, increasing the number of their own decedents.”

- Dr Rufus Johnstone, Department of Zoology, University of Cambridge & Dr Michael Cant, University of Exeter's School of Biosciences (Cornwall Campus)

A definite kinship bond has been created, a bond for development and mentoring that will benefit everyone. I like to think that our first Grandmother had a lot to do with that early Longevity Revolution.

With the advent of grandmothers to teach older children survival skills, and grandfathers too in their turn, we are looking at a different kind of evolution - Cultural Evolution. In this case adaptations are made much more quickly, because they are not dependent on genes and reproduction.

“During the 160,000 years that modern Homo sapiens have existed, there has been little time for genetic evolution to produce major innovations, but cultural evolution has taken human beings from the stone age to the modern age in just over 10,000 years.”

- Peter J. Lachmann – University of Cambridge

So in just over 10,000 years, in just a speck of evolutionary time, we have gone from stone age tools to computers, and I believe we owe a lot of this “progress” to that first mysterious Gramma.

Now I'm going to take a giant step forward in time and bring us closer to the topic of aging in the 21st century. We have taken some time with ancient un-recorded history, now we will move into recorded history, beginning with our western holy book, the Bible. Here I would like to review with you the difference between life span and life expectancy, which begins for us in this passage from the Old Testament.

Genesis Ch 6 Verse 3: “Then the Lord said: My spirit will not contend with man forever, for he is mortal: his days will be 120 years.”

Oddly enough, thousands of years later, medical science confirms 120 years as our biological life span, our life span potential.

Life expectancy, on the other hand, is a statistically averaged age at death in any given society. For instance, in the Greco Roman Era, although life expectancy for the average Greek or Roman at birth was around 25 years, old age was not uncommon; as demonstrated by these famous few: Sophocles 91, Hippocrates 83, Plato 81, Socrates 70, Cicero 63.

Of course, we know that Socrates drank the Hemlock at 70 and Cicero was murdered at 63. Who knows how long either might have lived otherwise.

Life expectancy at birth was based on infant and child mortality, which was very high; but, if one survived to age 20, one had a fair chance of reaching 50 or 60 and even beyond.

Now I would like to spend a little time with my favorite Roman. To my knowledge Cicero wrote the only lengthy treatment on old age in the ancient world. It was entitled *De Senectute* (On Old Age) and was written in 44 BC. I was first drawn to learning more about Cicero because of this statement of his:

“I will leave this world as I would an Inn, not as I would a home. For nature has provided us a place of entertainment, not of residence.”

I must admit I am quite intrigued by that statement. And the following one as well, but in a different way.

“Old age will only be respected if it fights for itself, maintains its rights, avoids dependence on anyone, and asserts control over its own to the last breath.”

Tell that to your local Congressperson. Truly, what I like about Cicero is that his words are just as valid today, if not even more so, than when they were first written. And here’s a further example:

“Enjoy the blessing of youth when you have it; when it is gone, don't wish it back - unless we are to think that young men should wish their childhood back... There is no fixed borderline for old age, and you are making a good and proper use of it as long as you can satisfy the call of duty and disregard death.”

I have long remembered Erik Erikson’s powerful statement that “healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death.”

“The result of this is that old age is even more confident and courageous than youth.”

- Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Senectute* 44 BC

Would that this last statement were generally true, dear Cicero, as I believe it should be.

Now we will say goodbye to Cicero and flash forward a number of centuries to Colonial America. Life expectancy was 37, a gain of 12 years from the time of the Romans, and again, a percentage of people lived much longer: John Adams 91, Ben Franklin 84, Thomas Jefferson 83, Washington 67.

So many great old men throughout history kind of begs the question: Were they great because they were old, or were they old because they were great? Carl Jung had this to say:

“A human being would certainly not grow to be 70 or 80 years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species. The afternoon of life must have a significance of its own and cannot be merely a pitiful appendage of life's morning.”

And I was inspired by these words from this marvelous teacher, Joan Halifax, whose message I believe is a calling for this critical time in our experience of an aging culture.

“The wisdom that we need to solve our problems lies encoded in the depths of our unconscious minds, but it must be evoked by elders who reveal our potentials.”

As Ghandi said: The difference between what we do and what we are capable of doing would suffice to solve most of the world's problems.

“Without realized models to evoke our archetypal depths, we are literally lost in the world. We have no map; we have no guide; we have no song; we have no Ariadne's thread to lead us out of the labyrinth.”

- Joan Halifax

And I wonder: For how long can we continue to say one thing and live another; for how long can we remain lost in a labyrinth of our own creation? Perhaps the way out of such chronic self deception resides in the meaning of this second Longevity Revolution for our species. Whether it becomes a Crisis, or an Opportunity, is entirely up to us.

Moving on with our historical time-line: By the year 1900, life expectancy had increased to 47 years, another 10 years since the time of the founding fathers. And then, as stated, life expectancy increased more in the 20th century than in all the preceding 5000

years; over 77 by the year 2000, and currently coming close to 80.

It will not only be the Boomers who will determine the future of aging, we all have work to do. And this man, who passed away just a few years ago, alluded to our current work with this prophetic statement, which is where we are today.

”One of the great challenges of the 21st Century will be to complete the architecture of the human life course.”

- Psychologist Paul Baltes, Center for Lifespan Psychology, Max Planck Institute - London

We currently have a life expectancy that is 34 years longer than our great grandparents, an amazing increase in just a few generations. What do you think it will mean for the boomer generations to explore these extended years and discover a whole new stage of life; as Paul Baltes said - to complete the architecture of the human life course? Perhaps to grow up, so to speak, to enter a new phase of maturity as a species? to move beyond the juvenile paralysis that seems to dominate our world today?

But, in order to explore this new and exciting development, to be more of who we really are, we must overcome an underlying mindset that is, in fact, our greatest enemy.

Internalized Ageism, as I said at the beginning, is so embedded in our culture, in our very subconscious, that we tend to accept it as truth. For the great majority of people in our society, Internalized Ageism is a fact of life.

Negative views of aging, internalized during childhood and youth, are unlikely to be consciously evaluated as we age. Immortal youth has no reason to question the negative stereotypes of old age. But, unlike other minorities, given long term practice with discrimination, Internalized Ageism awakens only when we reach

old age, leaving us deeply conflicted and defenseless at an already vulnerable time.

A hidden epidemic of elder addictions, notably alcohol and prescription drugs, feeds on Internalized Ageism. And even now, mainstream media sometimes tries to connect sophisticated images of pill taking and alcohol consumption with images of success.

Now, these next two slides of academic research have been publicized and shown in many places to make a pretty obvious point; nevertheless, this research should be made known to everyone, especially young people.

Harvard Research - Dr Ellen Langer: Perspectives on Psychological Science, November 2010

“Dr Langer believes that as we age, we have certain visceral responses to seeing ourselves getting older, and that these visceral responses accumulate over time, eventually turning into something bigger and more visible, even chronic disease. In other words, we internalize negative views of aging - they become part of our identity - with consequences down the line.”

And yet even further amazing research:

Dr. Becca Levy, Yale University, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol. 83, # 2.SL

“An optimistic outlook adds more years to your life than low blood pressure, low cholesterol, a healthy weight and regular exercise. Older people with positive self-perceptions of aging, measured up to 40 years earlier, lived 7 and a half years longer than those with less positive self-perceptions of aging.”

Even so, considering the gross exploitation of the vulnerabilities of aging in our market driven society, aging is synonymous with disability and old age has become, and remains, THE medicated

stage of life.

And so we have all become experts on internalized ageism.

When young people forget, it's ascribed to a lack of attention, but older people are dismissed as incompetent when they do the same. Unfortunately, it is often the older people themselves who reinforce this mistaken idea with their own negative self images.

How many of us have laughingly bought into the Senior Moment syndrome, when actually we have simply been having a human moment?

Aging is, in fact, a matter of both gains and losses, and if you focus on the losses, they magnify. The gains, although less evident to the uncaring eye, are also definitely there. Research into the aging brain has yielded some amazing results, but that's yet another presentation.

The current co-incidence of the Longevity Revolution and the Boomer Age Wave is changing history in ways we haven't even begun to imagine, ways in which the gains of aging, and not the losses, may well be magnified.

Of the many gurus on aging I could have chosen to wrap things up with today; notables like Ram Dass, Zalman Schacter, Robert Aichley, George Valiant, Robert Butler, Harry Moody, Richard Rohr, Thomas Cole, Robert Peck; I have chosen just a couple with whom to spend a few moments.

There is so much good work being done on the stages of aging, and on positive, or conscious aging, I would need another hour just to do an adequate survey. And I would have to begin with Erik Erikson because of his insightful Generativity vs Stagnation and Ego Integrity vs Despair, the last two of his eight stages of life.

But I've decided to close with a few comments on Robert Peck's "Three Tasks Of Ego Integrity As We Age," a further statement of his and one by Harry R. Moody.

Task 1 - "Ego differentiation: Finding self worth beyond a career."  
- When you encounter the world, it does not ask who you are, but rather what you do, by which you are defined. But this is more a matter of human doing than human being, sometimes involved with activity that is almost a denial of being. And beyond this point our society has no script for us to follow, no road map, and little interest in what we think, except as aging consumers.

Task 2 - "Body transcendence: Compensating for physical limitations." - I choose to think of this stage more in terms of collaboration than compensation. Physical limitations can bring a new awareness to the kinship between body, mind and spirit; a new and gentle, integrating dance of healing self respect. Also, Cicero's words of elder confidence and courage have particular meaning at this stage.

Task 3 - "Ego transcendence: Facing the reality of death with a focus on generativity." - To my mind a 21st century elder is an intergenerational elder, one who understands the value of reciprocal learning between the generations; that youth, mid-life and old age can come together as compassionate listeners, to learn from one another, to discover the magical balance of a more inclusive, holistic world view.

Now, these next two slides are my concluding slides. I think they say it all.

"Aging while retaining a high level of awareness is a challenge in our culture. It is understandable that many of us feel trapped in an aging body while the world around us constantly celebrates the

pleasures of youth. Aging with awareness requires being present in each moment and being willing to open to life and all of its complexities.”

- Robert Peck

“Conscious Aging means going beyond patterns of ego strength acquired during youth and mid-life. Conscious Aging, as an emerging cultural ideal, represents a genuinely new stage of life and a new level of psychological functioning.”

- Harry R. Moody

I believe we are a still evolving, changing species, very much in process, and that our next step, our destiny if you will, what could even be our Conscious Evolution, is right now up to us.

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