

Growing old, not worthless

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Staranje, ne brez vrednosti

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Do you know the three criteria that are a sure sign of growing old? The three criteria are: First, when the first thing you look for when opening the newspaper in the morning is who has died. Second, if you think you're getting smarter by solving Sudokus. And third, when you bend down to tie your shoes, thinking: if I'm already down, what else can I do? If these three criteria all apply to you, remember: "I am going slightly old".

Our personal and social ideas of growing old and being old include latent and manifest ageism, but also the positive images of age that encourage us to embrace growing old. Many scientific disciplines and many psycho-guidebooks deal with old age, how to prolong it, how to live healthier, be more productively and more actively. But the question of what makes old age valuable and worth living for is often left out. Lars Tornstam's (2005) model of gerotranscendence offers us an idea of the opportunities for appreciation and meaningfulness that growing old holds.

Our ideas about growing old

We have no personal experience of what it feels like to grow old, and subsequently to die. We do not know whether we will stay healthy or become ill, how and when death will befall us. Growing old is like a journey into the unknown. We have no control over our future life, no matter how hard we try. We are no different than the onion fly, *delia antiqua*, which eats its way from layer to layer of the onion but, until it reaches the next layer, does not know what it tastes like.

We hardly have the opportunity to empathize with people who are older than we are. A kindergarten child has only a vague idea of what is going on at school, a loving couple has little idea of how having a child together changes their relationship, just as a 50-year-old can hardly imagine how a multimorbid 85-year-old feels.

A fact that even famous psychologists have had to take note of. Erik H. Erikson, a pioneer in the study of the human life course, described the human life cycle in his fifth decade of life. When he himself had grown old, he had to realize that as a young person you cannot fully describe the experience of old age. This is how the undifferentiated view of old age happens; if a blanket view of old people takes place, a differentiated perception becomes impossible. Edmund Sherman, who as a young sociologist dealt extensively with questions of age, expressed it similarly. He wrote: "...many of the things my colleagues and I have written about later life, based on the 'objective' findings of gerontological research and practice, feel different when experienced personally" (Sherman, 2010, p. 5). So much for the difference between our objective scientific findings and our personal experiences.

Social images of old age

Crucial are the images we have of old age. They are shaped by economic, nursing, medical, psychological, physical, aesthetic or social concepts.

An example: In Austria, people are entitled to a "retirement benefit" after decades of working life. The German word for it is "Ruhegenuss", translated verbatim it means enjoyment of rest. This implies that after retirement the time of rest and enjoyment has begun.

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If we take this literally, it confirms our preconception or prejudice that, from now on, keeping still is the order of the day. The connection between “retirement” and “rest in peace” or “*requiescat in pace*” arises almost by itself.

Language dealing with old people is very treacherous. Remember the saying: You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.

For my 50th birthday, like all 50-year-olds at the time, I received an invitation to the senior citizens’ club from the mayor of the town where I live. “Senior” in Latin is the intensified form of “*senex*,” and *senex* already means “aged,” “old,” “geriatric.” To this day, I feel uneasy being described as a “senior”, that is, older than old. Old people are often called “best agers” as long as they are active. Even, if the mayor had invited me to the club of “best agers”, I would have found that an undercutting devaluation.

In everyday discourse, “old age” tends to be compressed and seen as a single phase of life, although this phase may well encompass thirty or more years. Alone, the many terms used for the different age phases refer to a differentiated aging process. Young old, old old, mature old, elderly, advanced old, aged, long-lived, very old, a.s.o. From the perspective of young people, “the” elderly seems to be a more or less homogeneous group. Ageing, however, is a process that takes on forms that can be distinguished from one another, while also merging into one another. According to Hans-Werner Wahl (Wahl, 2008, 2017), in the so-called third age there are many potentials and possibilities, in the fourth age there are restrictions due to loss of function or serious illnesses, which many nevertheless manage well and age successfully. In the fifth age, the approaching death determines development, mental performance and emotional well-being. There is therefore no such thing as “the” age because individual life courses do not run in a linear fashion, may show breaks and can be significantly different from one another. People of the same age differ from each other more clearly than is the case with young children (Wahl, 2008, 2017).

At the same time, old people can be very different from each other: They range from active and healthy 60-year-olds to 90-year-olds in need of palliative care, from multimorbid 70-year-olds to mentally and physically active 100-year-olds. From healthy people, who do not need to see a doctor or therapist until old age, from patients who live well with chronic diseases to people who need acute care to save their lives or require long-term or palliative care.

It is certainly no coincidence that a particular conception of the course of human development emerged in parallel with the advent of industrialization in Europe. This pictorial representation of the inverted U-shaped course of human development, an upward and downward staircase, which has been common since the 17th century, could be found in every annual calendar, was depicted in many pictures and graced the cover of a medical journal only a few years ago (Hannas, 1650). The depiction of the life course divides life into ten stages, evoking a negative image of old age in us. From the imperfection of childhood, the human being develops with increasing efficiency to a peak in middle age, only to decline inevitably and comprehensively with increasing age until death. Despite everything that casts doubt on this image, it still has significant power over us. This one-sided idea of “ups

and downs” as a function of chronological age fundamentally requires understanding human existence as merely physical. The idea that physical death is not the end of human existence, but only the transition into another form, must inevitably lead to other images.

It is interesting to note a study of U.S. print publications (books, magazines, ...) which revealed that positive age stereotypes were prevalent until the end of the 19th century, only to become increasingly negative from the turn of the 20th century. We may ask ourselves whether this has to do with the increasing proportion of people over 65 in the population, or with the fact that old age is increasingly associated with illness and old people are seen as patients rather than as individual personalities with interesting life experiences (Ng et al., 2015).

As self-evident as the idea of lifelong development from conception to death is today - even in science - the ideas of what old age and aging might look like in a concrete life plan are still not very creative. A major obstacle to this is latent and manifest ageism.

Ageism

Ageism occurs when legitimate claims are ignored because someone is old in years: through verbal disparagement, failure to provide assistance, physical attacks, avoidance of contact, or when living conditions differ from those of young people to the detriment of old people, and obstructions in access to resources become apparent (Rothermund & Mayer, 2009).

Ageism manifests itself openly or creeps into our lives subtly and hardly noticeable as such. Subtle, thoughtless ageism includes, for example, complaints about the “overageing” of our society: who determines how many may grow old, how old a population may become? The “overestimation of cognitive impairment” of old people, the overemphasis on the need for care or the one-sided view of old people as patients and the overmedicalization are also part of this.

Many people want to grow old, but they don’t want to look that way. Some think that it is possible to grow old and stay fit, look attractive, young and pretty, and still enjoy an active and productive life. In order to escape the dreaded ageism, some put themselves in the hands of the surgeon, have an operation or nerve toxin injected under the skin in order to hide the natural signs of aging under a wrinkle-free face.

We also encounter a lot of discrimination in everyday life - often not recognized as such - such as hard-to-open packaging of CD cases, hard-to-read writing on screens of cash machines, price labels in supermarkets, package inserts of medicines, an unfavorable relation of step heights to step depths, the unspoken compulsion to use mobile phones or other types of newer technologies, and much more.

If you go to the doctor as an old person, he will usually speak to you more politely, more distantly, but also less engaged and patiently than he does with a young patient. He will use simple, short sentences, overly clear pronunciation, often avoiding eye contact, and exaggerated gestures and facial expressions to explain your diagnosis and therapy to you. On the whole, such conversations are less suitable for

designing an adequate and, above all, shared decision making and advance care planning (Rothermund & Mayer, 2009).

Old people often perceive themselves as inferior or worthless because of their age. A few weeks ago, I was a patient at the doctor's office. There was a lady sitting in the waiting room who told the person sitting next to her, "When age is here, it's over!" As long as we experience old age(s) only as the afterpiece of a more or less successful (working) life and not as a new challenge, we will remain in a negative age bubble and be inclined to adopt all the negative prejudices and discriminatory attitudes towards our own generation. Juliet in Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" put it this way in the face of her governess: "But old men do as if they lived no more, sluggish, unhelpful, and like lead so heavy" (Shakespeare, 1597/1998).

Or, as the philosopher Schopenhauer (1851) wrote: "Most of the old people, of course, become more and more like automats in old age: they always think, say and do the same thing, and no external impression is able to change anything about them, or to evoke something new from them. Talking to such old people is like writing in the sand: the impression disappears almost immediately afterwards" (p. 463).

In Austria we had elections to the National Council in 2017. At that time, almost 10% of the population was over 75 years old, but among the more than 2000 candidates for a mandate in the Austrian National Council, there was not a single one from this age group. The "wise old people" do not exist, at least in day-to-day politics. We do not know what the cause is, whether the old people take themselves out of the running, are not taken seriously by the parties campaigning for elections, or whether the usual political establishment has distanced itself too far from the real concerns of the old. In any case, a remarkable phenomenon. Check whether this is also the case in your country.

Discriminatory treatment of the elderly is personally offensive to those affected and also has a massive impact on their health. Old people who are repeatedly confronted with negative prejudices and have even adopted them for themselves, i.e., internalize them as their own age stereotype, are more likely to experience chronic stress, reduced cognitive performance and a deterioration in their physical condition. They are also more likely to suffer from chronic or cardiovascular disease, develop psychiatric symptoms, and, moreover, have less favorable brain development and more biomarkers for Alzheimer's disease. The consequences of this ageism cause enormous costs, not least for the healthcare system (Allen, 2016; Kwak et al., 2018; Levy et al., 2002, 2018, 2020).

It is not the changes associated with increasing age, but their interpretation that determines whether we feel successful, satisfied, even happy, or whether we give in to despair and depressive mood. We cannot defeat our age; we should at least make friends with it. It has long been proven that those who can see their ageing in a positive light have a significantly higher life expectancy than those who cannot find anything good about their ageing. Those who feel younger than their chronological age experience greater well-being, better health, may enjoy longevity and have better preserved and healthier brain structures.

Trend reversal

According to a study by Palmore (1977), many young people believed that everyday life for very old people consisted mainly of inactivity and rest, that the subject of dying and death had high priority, that most old people could no longer learn anything new, and that very few old people still had any distinct goals in life. Today we know that the opposite is true. Current scientific findings no longer primarily emphasize the physical and other losses that growing old entails, but instead focus on the positive aspects and potential of aging. For example, the fact that learning is possible into old age. So, what makes the experience of old age seem valuable?

More than 2,000 years ago, Marcus Tullius Cicero wrote a psychologically astute plea against the destructive treatment of old people in his "Cato maior de senectute". He refutes four prejudices about old people and describes the advantages that only old people have (Cicero, 2011). The first prejudice is that old age keeps people from doing anything and forces them to be inactive. On the contrary, Cicero believes, old age does not prevent people from being active. Great things are not accomplished through physical strength, but through planning and decision-making in the political, domestic, artistic, educational and philosophical spheres.

Cicero counters the (second) prejudice of diminishing physical strength in old age by saying that one should use one's physical strength as long as it is there, but when it is no longer there, one should not miss it. One should exercise one's spirit and mind, because in old age the mental powers are of increasing importance compared to the physical ones.

In old age - so the third prejudice goes - the pleasures of lust and enjoyment dwindle. Although there is no particular desire for sexual pleasure in old age, the pleasures of the mind, in that one can learn something new every day, become more important.

Old age is burdened by near death, is the fourth prejudice. Well, death can strike people at any age; for the elderly, unlike the young, it is a natural and expected end. Thus, old age is like the last act of a play, because nature has given us, in our bodies, a place to stay temporarily and not to live in permanently.

A successful "ars senescendi" - the art of dignified ageing - requires two things: On the one hand, reflection on the past life, acceptance of one's own finiteness, dealing with dying and death. On the other hand, something like curiosity about life, becoming aware, using opportunities and acquiring a positive attitude towards one's own ageing.

This doesn't really seem to be popular in our science-oriented psychology. In a thousand-page textbook of developmental psychology - that is, the sub-discipline of psychology that deals with the changes in the human life course from conception to death - which is well known in our language area, a short sentence is devoted to the term "dying". It reads: What would happen if dying were not recognised "as an evil to be avoided as far as possible", ... but rather as a "self-evident component of social life"? However, only half a sentence is devoted to "death", namely that it should be regarded as an "uncontrollable event of loss" (Oerter & Montada, 2008, p. 406, 937).

From the experiences of dying people, however, we know that the greatest fear at the threshold of death is the recognition of not having really lived, of having wasted the valuable, because only, life, of not having had the courage to live one's own life, to express feelings, to have worked too much, to have broken off contact with friends, and ultimately not to have allowed oneself to be happier (Ware, 2013).

Gerotranscendence

Hermann Hesse, a German winner of the Nobel Prize laureate for Literature, said about old age: "Everyone knows that it brings discomfort and that at its end there is death. This is a bitter reality. But it would be sad to surrender only to this process of decay and not see that old age also has its good points, its advantages, and joys" (LYRIK! #literaturforum, 2019).

Some people give the impression that they are traveling on a speeding train that has lost its driver. They cannot enjoy this journey and are only waiting for the train to come to a halt by some external event. Other old people, on the other hand, achieve incredible things, phenomena: Michelangelo Buonarroti took on the commission to continue building St. Peter's Basilica at the age of 70 and did not hand it over until his death at 89. Or let us think of Marc Chagall, who created the famous stained-glass windows in the Fraumünster Church in Zurich in his 8th, 9th and 10th decades. We are all also familiar with the soon-to-be 80-year-old, multiple great-grandfather who, on stage, performs not only artistically but also physically in a way that would overwhelm many 20-year-olds. You may guess who I am thinking of.

Each of us must find a personal, individual way to give meaning and value to growing old, despite the usual complaints and devaluations. Scientific findings about aging can be an indication of what awaits us in old age. But this is not certain. The experience of aging must go hand in hand with a redefinition of growing old and old age that is beyond the economically oriented notion of productivity and beyond an extension of what we have known and been used to.

From the Swedish sociologist Lars Tornstam comes the theory of gerotranscendence (Tornstam, 2005, 2011). One could translate the term literally as "age transcendence," as it were a metaperspective at a higher age. Gerotranscendence is something like a potential for development, which varies from person to person. A potential for the formation of a new perspective on life. It includes three dimensions that describe a movement from a more materialistic and rational worldview to a more cosmic and transcendent worldview, associated with an increase in life satisfaction.

The cosmic dimension describes the change in the experience of time by transcending boundaries between now and before. One feels connected with earlier generations, with ancestors, and can recognize connections and intergenerational perspectives. The relationship to death is accepted more calmly, mysterious sides of life can be admitted, not everything must be able to be explained rationally. Spiritual values can also be lived and the joy in small events of everyday life and in natural phenomena increases.

The dimension of the self ("self") describes self-awareness and awareness in recognizing and accepting positive and negative aspects of the self that have been hidden until now. It offers the possibility to understand oneself in a new way, to give up self-centeredness and ego-centeredness. Self-interest is replaced by focusing on the needs of others, such as children and grandchildren. But it also offers the chance to rediscover one's own inner child and to experience the inner richness that the second half of life offers.

There is a connection to be made between strengthening one's physical, psychological and cognitive capacity and recognizing one's own finiteness and death. In aging, therefore, another form of maturity and development is possible; here, what has been missed can be made up for, latent potential can be discovered, ideas for the future can be formulated, dreams can be realized, and independent creations can be made that could not succeed in other phases of life. The prerequisite for all of this is openness to new things and taking advantage of the opportunity to become whole.

The dimension "Social and personal relationships" draws our attention to the opportunity for a reorientation in social relationships. Old, superficial relationships become unimportant, individual new relationships become important. An active need for "solitude", for withdrawal can be lived, but this is not to be understood as loneliness, disengagement or depression. The rejection of nonsensical social norms, conventions and roles, the abandonment of rigid ideas of right and wrong, in favor of a broad-mindedness and openness are part of it.

The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer put it aptly when he wrote: "Towards the end of life, it is like towards the end of a masked ball, when the larvae are taken off. One now sees who those with whom one had come into contact during one's life had actually been. For the characters have revealed themselves and all illusions have disintegrated" (Schopenhauer, 1851, p. 461).

Gerotranscendence describes a development that is not based on the reduction of existing resources, not on the activation of hidden potentials, and also not on the continuation of practiced behaviors and the adherence to performance-oriented norms, but rather brings forth something new that was not possible in this way in the previous life. It offers itself as a counter-model to the ideas of the anti-aging movement with the delusion of having to look younger than one is according to the years. The prerequisite for being able to use this development potential is our inner willingness to do so. Even if there is justified criticism of Tornstam's proposal, for example because of its lack of coherence, it is at least helpful for (old) people "in looking forward to discovering a new kind of purpose in life" (Jewell, 2014, p. 119).

Conclusion

Growing old is like walking on a steep staircase/path without a railing or handholds. Whether it goes up or down is our decision. Mario de Andrade, the Brazilian writer put it in a nutshell in his poem "My soul is in a hurry": "I counted my years and discovered that I have fewer years left to live compared to the time I have lived until now. We have two

lives and the second begins when you realize you only have one” (Andrade, 2016).

What can we do?

How to promote aging worth living for ourselves, as scientists or as practicing psychologists? We can

- promote a positive view of aging and the experience of the inner richness that the second half of life offers without getting stuck in “positive thinking”,
- treat old people with respect, avoiding any kind of ageism and accepting individual life experiences
- open up creative spaces for new experiences, and arouse enthusiasm so that new things can be acquired and learned
- paying attention to the different ways of influencing health, promoting satisfying close relationships and cultivating spiritual values.

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