

The Developmental Task for Elders

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From a review of the literature, Trowbridge² found the following possibilities mentioned by researchers regarding areas of development in later years:

- Enduring illness and loss without undue diminishment of activity and good spirits;
- A widening circle of caring for and taking care of.
- Post-formal thought—recognition of the validity of differing reality systems, and Monitoring and regulating thoughts and emotions.
- Self-actualization (including creativity, a sense of play, learning how to live well).
- Deepening self-knowledge, integrating all aspects of one's person, setting the personal self in a larger context and identifying with that context.
- Gaining of wisdom, the culmination of human development.

The last two of these identify the basic developmental step for elders: that of transcending the human-made world of concepts and learning the suprahuman perspective. That is, the concepts and institutions of humans are artificial strategems whose purpose is to facilitate survival. These concepts and institutions are not particularly profound or complete expressions of the universe in which they evolved as local, *ad hoc* forms.

As a person approaches death, it becomes necessary to recognize that the human world is temporary, yet the matrix within which this sentient being formed—in all domains of human experience: physical, mental, social, spiritual—is not going to be left behind. We return to the ocean from whence we came. We are fragments of the cosmos that have briefly formed as *Homo sapiens* (self-described). Our life has influenced this ocean just as the ocean is its womb. Would that we could bring it peace, this incomplete cosmos. Or would that be precisely the wrong pursuit for creatures that have proved so incapable of being trusted with power?

It is naïve to imagine that with birth, or conception, something new was created. All things spring from their context. For humans, there is already an elaborate structure of DNA and of culture within which the new organism is conceived and born.

The assumption that the human-defined world adequately, or even accurately, reproduces reality, in its totality or in its essence, is stunningly naïve. Just as the part cannot comprehend the whole, to take the human perspective as the cosmic norm is childish. Also, concepts are not reality, but already, to an undetermined extent, interpretation.

The notion that reality is coextensive with human empirical methods is another unwarranted assumption: empirical methods must be invented to comprehend reality *sans parti pris*, without rejecting experience not conveniently researched by present methods. Creative empirical psychologists can certainly find ways to operationalize and measure the holistic insight that is wisdom—not *practical* wisdom, but wisdom plain and simple. That is, intuitive understanding of self and universe. Self-knowledge: recognizing that all

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² R. H. Trowbridge. 2008. *Wisdom and Lifelong Learning in the 21st Century*. In Ronald Barnett and Nicholas Maxwell, Eds., *Wisdom in the University*, London: Routledge.

things are emanations of the One. We are always in the same universe, we perceive it differently in different forms. There is only one universe in which all that is is constantly changing. And the One would be?

The remaking of identity is the task of the final stage of life; it is the culmination of human development in that it takes and centers consciousness beyond the human. The final developmental task for a human is to say goodbye to one world and hello to another. To take leave of many of the roles we have filled up until now. To arrive at closure with the roles and tasks of a lifetime. Not to leave unaccomplished some fundamental task we were meant to accomplish, given the opportunity of a human life.

On the positive side, we have the opportunity to go beyond the narrow restraints of *Homo sapiens* and its bittersweet achievements. A new, free and expansive world lies ahead. It is the opportunity to perceive reality beyond the limits of the humano-centric, or the sociocentric. This means to live this perspective in our daily life.

The world doesn't change, only our perspective. While it will be most useful to withdraw from habitually familiar surroundings, it is intrinsically better to be fruitful (as is a person who has found authentic flourishing) to the greatest possible extent. In this sense, "fruitful" only applies to being one with the *tao*; and "greatest possible extent" to nurturing authentic flourishing in others.

The task is to transition to a new sense of identity and meaning. It is the opening of a vast new dimension of reality. Otherwise the opportunity that existed for a few years, of being conscious, aware, reflective of existence and its ways, will remain unperceived and unexplored—and who knows what happens after? We have such a wonderful opportunity to bring the light of understanding to the cosmos, and perhaps of furthering the work of the cosmic trajectory, it would be a great loss not to show our gratitude by taking advantage of the opportunity, and reflecting on life, and sharing our thoughts and insights. Most importantly, this reflection achieves the perspective through which the full context, the interwoven unity of all things, becomes visible.

This is a time of many goodbyes. And a time of realizing that beyond the goodbyes is an endless process. We will say goodbye to the body: "You've been a good body, thank you, farewell." And goodbye to the mind: "You've been a good mind. I've enjoyed it. Thank you with all that I am. Farewell—but how will I fare well? Body and mind dropped off, what is there?"

It is the elder's task to spend himself in sharing the gifts E³ has developed, the wisdom E has learned over a full lifetime. To overflow with wise love, that is, to appreciate and further that which is best for the other. It will be to our debit if we depart not having loved enough.

For our entire life we have been working to establish ourselves in the human-made world. Now we learn that all of that must be dropped off as we enter a transition as momentous as that of birth.

³ Note on gender-inclusive language: for the generic use of pronouns with human referents, 'E' is sometimes used here for the nominative case (= he, she), and 'hir' for the other cases (=, e.g., him, her, his). We are fortunate that in English it is easy to make our language gender inclusive. There is no reason not to do so, and every reason not to postpone doing so. Furthermore, such usage is more exact. Very often one wishes to refer to a generic human, and to be forced by language to refer to either a male or a female introduces an unnecessary condition into the discussion. To use E or hir is as simple as to use 'Ms.' to refer to any woman (= Miss or Mrs.); and in speaking, the pronunciation is the same as currently used terms. That is, 'E' is pronounced almost like the word 'he', and 'hir' is pronounced exactly like the word 'her.' Incidentally, the term 'hir' dates back to Chaucer, though he used it as a plural (= their).

It is particularly important to be aware that the developmental task of this stage of life is more drastic than the change to adult years or the transition to retirement and life without children. The other major developmental tasks of life seem to have been mainly intuitive, natural, and relatively easy to accomplish at least passably well. Development in earlier stages is facilitated by the structures of society in which the tasks are dictated by physical maturation, reinforced by institutions: schooling; forming an authentic, intimate relationship; work competence; parenting; and generally functioning adequately in society. Caring, acting as stewards of this world, insofar as our responsibility extends. Stewards in the natural, the relational, and the civic worlds. Knowing that this present moment, right here, is eternity, nowhere and notime else. You still have to take care of your things in heaven.

The final transition is not so obvious, and it requires real sacrifice. This is the stage of goodbye to *all* ties to the socially defined world, to consensus reality. Our sense of who we are, the particular meanings we have found for our identity as a separate person, must be surrendered. Parents have died or are fragile. Children are independent and we are less important to them. Or not—but the relationship certainly changes after the children become independent. On top of everything else, health and survival itself become unavoidable concerns. We become our own caretakers, and maybe a caretaker for someone else as well. And then we become caretaken.

Becoming an elder requires that we discern a new direction, and a new center of identity. The earlier stages are well marked-out, but there are no guides for the final one. Because the path has not been created (or perhaps, maintained) in contemporary society, each person must figure out the path for himself. This is the value of working in groups, in which we support each other on this journey, and synergize our successful transcendence of the mere human. Groups can share what they learn.

Our contemporary world is blinded by materialism. It is unable to perceive existence in its full context. There are, in fact, guides for the journey to that which is beyond the human, but YOU must do the work, particularly the work of discerning which are the genuine guides and interpreting their meaning. And no-one can make the transition to transpersonal identity for you. Only experience counts here.

I imagine that not many older people, and far fewer younger people, recognize that there is an important task for older people to accomplish. After a lifetime of working hard to fit in and succeed in the social world, all of a sudden our social roles are no longer relevant. This leaves many older people at a loss. They don't see any social role for themselves, and their understanding of the spiritual role may be immature and simplistic.

The task is to drop off the concepts and constructs of the man-made world, to begin to resonate with other energies. This is to transcend the human plane. One way or another it will happen. This is the time to prepare, to find that which is true, or more true than this world of illusion.

The task of transcendence is made more important and more difficult in our time by the fact that technology has a trajectory that is destructive of crucial aspects of human relations with other beings and with the natural world in general. In addition, cultural traditions are changing—they are useless baggage for the Machine. There appears to be an unstoppable mechanizing of life and growing dependence on the machine, and unremitting diminishment of everything that is human.

There is some good news. Opportunities for progressing along this transition occur in every encounter. Every moment we can start anew. This transition is as appropriate in the Machine Age as it was in the Human Age. Also, elders are naturally immune to what

the Machine can offer—unless they become stuck in a dream of staying forever young. There is nothing the Machine can offer that can make up for, or even be of any use for, the journey an older person will soon have to make. In fact, the Machine is useless for responding to the spiritual need for meaning and unity with all that exists, the deep human longing, of which the Machine is oblivious. This is perhaps a trump card for humanity.

Earlier human beings were limited in their ability to live fully by inability to reflect on existence—even if they could free their continued development from being consumed by survival demands and life from being cut prematurely short. Howard Gardner writes that “Thinking explicitly about one’s own mind, about one’s own thinking, may be a relatively new phenomenon, except among philosophers”⁴—and this self-awareness has not been mastered by all Western philosophers either.

Contemporary humans are perhaps more self-conscious than those in earlier times, but now opportunities for exploring full humanness are continually diminished by the forces of mechanization. There are certainly gains, but our interactions with other beings are increasingly mediated through the Machine, and the Machine takes over more and more space from that which is organic and alive. The natural world and the mechanical world are very different realities, and humans are still hardly aware of the value and the possibilities for *biota*; or of the value of balance between the two worlds.

This final stage of development involves every aspect of our lives: physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual. The transcendence of the human world must be achieved consciously in the course of daily activities: it will not happen automatically. This takes work, that is, a mind that can focus in contemplation and be fully present in the present moment. This is not easy either. Contemplation is required for intuition to present itself.

Humans are given the opportunity to both stand for and actively foster the flourishing of all things. This implies a commitment to be active in bringing about the opportunity for every person to accomplish this final stage of human growth; indeed, to help others recognize that this possibility exists, that it is the flowering that completes a human life. Of course, flourishing goes far beyond the human, and human commitment follows as far as possible.

We can go farther than commitment to a flourishing Earth, we can provide a path for people to follow. It is a big job, but for those willing to make the effort, this mission brings rewards money can never buy. It is the gift of maturity for humanity.

⁴ *The Disciplined Mind*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999, p. 74.