



Can Aging Be an Opportunity?

A Provocateur Paper

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This is a Provocateur Paper. Its purpose is to support you, the reader, in recognizing your assumptions and beliefs about a specific topic. It is NOT an attempt to change your mind, but to support you in recognizing how your automatic beliefs about what is possible is influenced by those assumptions and beliefs. It may support you in considering other possible assumptions and beliefs if that's where your mind goes, and in that way you will either choose to experiment with different assumptions or to confirm your current ones.

"How you imagine life determines how you live it." – David Suzuki

This isn't a special report. It doesn't try to make the case for aging being an opportunity of any kind. I'm still working that out for myself! I've included a few points on how we might go about making it an opportunity, because I need to see how something can be operationalized before I'm prepared to accept it – but this part is not a comprehensive treatment of the how. The paper is intentionally on the short side, and the provocations are intended to be intriguing, not exhausting!

Aging is a funny business, isn't it? We begin to age the moment we're born, and up to the time we're 30 or 40 or so, it's a good thing. We're 'growing up' and that seems to indicate that there are all kinds of wonderful opportunities ahead of us. But at some point, the aging process stops being fun. (The time seems to be particular to each one of us: there's not a general rule). We decide not to celebrate birthdays any more, respond to queries about our age with comments like 'I'm 29 and holding' or something to the equivalent. Aging also seems to become less and less attractive. By the time we're 40 or 50, in most cases we start to get really grumpy about it. While there are exceptions, aging seems to be mainly about loss (of something we thought would last forever like our hairlines!), bad news, pain, or other negative experiences – certainly not about what kinds or how many opportunities seem to be on the horizon! (Different people will value different things, so it's not about specifying what the opportunities should be, but whether there are any.)

It's worthwhile thinking about the aging process. Agreed, our society is one that reveres youth, but why are we revering that which none of us are becoming? Might we begin to consider that maybe, just maybe, aging could be an opportunity instead of a massive downhill slide?

It helps to recognize when you have unquestioned assumptions that influence thoughts and behaviors. One exercise I remember from a workshop I attended when I wanted to quit smoking, was to take a close look at magazine photos of people who were smoking while in wonderful settings, i.e. boating, having fun with friends, etc. Our job was to notice that the cigarette usually didn't 'match' the photo: it was positioned at a funny angle or was misaligned in other ways. (This predated Photoshop, so now it might not be as easy to see how the cigarette had been added into the picture.) I never again saw such a photo without being conscious that it had been changed to suit the advertiser. The parallel to this paper is once we notice the dissonance between our desires and the cues in our environment, we cannot go back: the subtle influences no longer pass unnoticed and we can be more conscious in our decisions.

This paper includes two dimensions to consider: whether aging can be an opportunity for us as individuals, and whether it's an advantage for the collective unit (family, community, society).

1. Can aging be an opportunity for individuals?

I've found a few ways that help me to recognize my assumptions and beliefs when examining a certain topic. One of them is paying attention to how I react to a quote, to a picture or graphic image, to a short vignette, or my associations with a word. First, is whether I'm drawn in or repelled. (Sometimes those are pictures in my mind, as I described in the book chapter that led you to this paper!) Second, is to reflect on my reaction and then watch over a few days for parallels in the world as I go about my regular routine. Over time, I start to realize patterns, possible assumptions and beliefs that I can consider more deeply.

Here's a selection of quotes, pictures, vignettes and word associations for you to reflect on. Notice your thoughts, body reactions, or maybe pictures that pop into your mind from your observations. Keep in mind that there's no right or wrong here as you're just making note of your thoughts. Are you drawn to the idea that aging could be an opportunity, or are you mostly repelled? This is based, of course, on the assumption that aging is anything but an opportunity! Don't try and change them – just notice them for now.

Quotes

Notice your reaction as you read each of the following quotations. What does it suggest about your assumptions and beliefs about aging? Do you view them as an opportunity or a decline? Don't do them all at once, but return from time to time to consider a new one.

"The aging process has you firmly in its grasp if you never get the urge to throw a snowball." ~ Doug Larson

"Nobody grows old merely by living a number of years. We grow old by deserting our ideals. Years may wrinkle the skin, but to give up enthusiasm wrinkles the soul." ~ Samuel Ullman

"You are as young as your faith, as old as your doubt; as young as your self-confidence, as old as your fear; as young as your hope, as old as your despair." ~ Douglas MacArthur

"Growing old is mandatory; growing up is optional." ~ Chili Davis

"In youth the days are short and the years are long; in old age the years are short and the days long." ~ Nikita Ivanovich Panin

"Age does not diminish the extreme disappointment of having a scoop of ice cream fall from the cone." ~ Jim Fiebig

"In a man's middle years there is scarcely a part of the body he would hesitate to turn over to the proper authorities." ~ E.B. White

"Wrinkles should merely indicate where smiles have been." ~ Mark Twain, *Following the Equator*

"Youth is a wonderful thing. What a crime to waste it on children." ~ George Bernard Shaw

"The first sign of maturity is the discovery that the volume knob also turns to the left." ~ Jerry M. Wright

"Thirty-five is when you finally get your head together and your body starts falling

apart." ~ Caryn Leschen

"Forty is the old age of youth; fifty the youth of old age." ~ Victor Hugo

"Age is a high price to pay for maturity." ~ Tom Stoppard

"By the time I have money to burn, my fire will have burnt out." ~ Author Unknown

"To know how to grow old is the master-work of wisdom, and one of the most difficult chapters in the great art of living." ~ Henri Amiel

"We've put more effort into helping folks reach old age than into helping them enjoy it." ~ Frank A. Clark

"First you forget names, then you forget faces, then you forget to pull your zipper up, then you forget to pull your zipper down." ~ Leo Rosenberg

"The tragedy of old age is not that one is old, but that one is young." ~ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1891

"It is possible at any age to discover a lifelong desire you never knew you had." ~ Robert Brault,

"When it comes to staying young, a mind-lift beats a face-lift any day." ~ Marty Bucella

"No matter how old you are, the world is still in front of you. It's not behind you." ~ Jerry Reid

"When did you notice that death had at least one foot in your front door? I guess there are a lot of ways to react to getting old. You can deny it. Try to conceal it. Camouflage it. Or accept it and get on with life. There is still work to do. Good work that only you can do. I knew a genius potter who had one poster on his wall. It was a picture of an old-bearded Jewish Hasidic scholar, pen in hand, bent over reams of scrolls and writing still. Underneath were the words, 'Work, just work.'" ~ Mary Lou Kownacki, *Old Monk (Benetvision)*

Word Associations

What reaction do you have to the following words? Jot down what comes to your mind first, or draw a sketch to illustrate your thoughts.

Aging

Middle Age

Old

Young Old, Middle Old, Old Old

Do 'Aging' and 'Opportunity' connect well in a sentence?

Implicit Bias Online Self-test

Harvard University has an online test for you to check your implicit bias about a number of things, age being one of them. You can take the test by clicking on the following link: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>

Pictures

What thoughts do these images evoke related to viewing aging as opportunity or as a decline. You could also choose pictures or graphics from magazines and create a collage to reflect on.



Vignettes

Notice your reaction when viewing these vignettes. Is there something you could imagine for yourself or are they totally out of the question?

Read the story and watch the video of Jerry Reid, the 70 year old who went back to college. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/70-year-old-gives-it-the-old-college-try/> May 20, 2014. When Jerry Reid received his diploma (graduating at age 70 from university), his classmates cheered... and you understood why. He wasn't some old guy starting over in college. He was one of them, starting the rest of his life.

Read Elizabeth Gilbert's commentary on her Inner Crone:

<http://www.elizabethgilbert.com/in-praise-of-the-inner-crone-ok-we-all-know-about-the-inner-child-right/>

2. Collective – Can Aging be an opportunity for society?

Part of our assumptions and beliefs about aging comes from our experiences of what's mirrored back to us. The media is a powerful mirror. News articles of the 'Chicken Little' variety describe how our health systems will collapse under the aging population. (Particularly here in Canada where I reside.) Up until about 10 years or so ago, you'd be hard pressed to see a positive photo or description of an older person in the media. Now with the recognition that the size of the baby boomer cohort means advertising to older adults is good business, the photos and verbiage are starting to change. Movies that show a generally positive view of older characters are now starting to arrive on the scene.

Another societal example is the assumptions about aging that are imbedded in policy and services. For example, one general indicator about a society is the 'total dependency ratio.' The World Bank calculates this as "the ratio of dependents – people younger than 15 or older than 64, to the working-age population – those ages 15-64." Some refer to it as representing the burden on productive members of a society. So according to this ratio, once you turn 65 you move from being a productive member of a society to being a burden. In part, this is a statistic that's borne of the assumption that the only productive contribution to society is through work. Societal Statistics like the total dependency ratio infuse decisions about economic, health, and social policies. Though they're largely invisible, they influence us in a myriad of ways.

Closer to home, common assumptions about aging are reflected in comments we hear from friends, family, and strangers in grocery lines. Notice for a day any conversations or comments that suggest someone's assumptions about aging. Are they generally positive stating that aging is an opportunity, as having wisdom, and as a person being a valuable asset? Or are they mostly associated with viewing aging as burdensome time fraught with illness and disability, limitations? Don't argue with them; just notice what they're saying. (Sometimes this is very hard, but it seems to spoil your ability to reflect. Besides, everyone is entitled to have their own opinions.)

If you like, write down your observations, draw a picture, or sketch about what the norms seem to be in your society.

Why do I think this kind of assumption-checking is worth it?

My life experiences lead me to believe that humans grow and change over time, and enter qualitatively different phases as we move through experiences in our life. (So it's not life stages as much as a life course approach that matters.) However, cognitive, moral, and relational development, unlike physical development, isn't a matter of simply waiting for nature to take its course. Development can be helped or hindered (and in some severe cases arrested) by our life experiences, and whether we take the time to mine them for the learnings they can yield. Learning is the key – that's what makes the difference between 'one year of experience 20 times' and '20 years of experience.' Sometimes, the learning is transformational and we actually make a shift into a more complex developmental stage (the key to becoming wiser). The systems we use to make meaning grow and change over time.

One musical example of this is the lyrics from the song *For Good* released in December of 2003. It is a duet sung between Elphaba (the Wicked Witch of the West) and Glinda, the Good Witch, in the Broadway play 'Wicked.'

"I've heard it said
That people come into our lives for a reason
Bringing something we must learn
And we are led
To those who help us most to grow
If we let them
And we help them in return
Well, I don't know if I believe that's true
But I know I'm who I am today
Because I knew you...

Who can say if I've been changed for the better?
But because I knew you
I have been changed for good."

I've looked at the research on developmental life course and how we all change and transform through life. It seems we pay more attention to childhood and youth developmental stages and less to the varied stages in adulthood. If you're one of the people who likes to consider conceptual and theoretical frames, Google 'Developmental Life Course Theories': you'll find a variety of readings. Some I've found useful are the

Eriksons’* different stages of adulthood, Graves on the stages of psychological growth[†] (popularized as Spiral Dynamics), Kegan[‡], and Cook-Greuter’s[§] stages of cognitive developmental stages. Brofenbrenner** describes a model that recognizes the critical interaction with our environment through life course developmental stages. If we want to be a truly ‘high performing’ person in all dimensions – physical, mental, relational, and spiritual, we can benefit by being conscious about what we’re doing to develop in each of these dimensions, and to be purposeful about recognizing transitions. And that journey requires consistent attention to what we’re learning about our underlying assumptions and beliefs about aging.

I find it helps to live life as Ralph Waldo Emerson proposed: “All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make the better.” It’s not always easy, and sometimes I discover things about myself that I don’t even approve of, but I find the end is worth it. I try to help myself to stay committed to experimenting even when it seems uncomfortable. One of the posters on my fridge is one where there are 2 circles that don’t touch. One is labelled ‘Your comfort zone’, and the other “Where magic happens.” It reminds me to have the courage to try things even when I’m not sure they will turn out, especially when the only thing at risk is likely to be my pride.

Where to now?

If this has intrigued you and you’d like to probe further into an Aging Dialogue with yourself, there’s lots of directions to go.

If you want to experiment with different assumptions and beliefs, check out the exercise in Immunity to Change <http://mindsatwork.com>, or follow the steps outlined in the Transforming My Aging Script chapter in the book *Pebbles in the Pond ~ Wave 3*. ***

* See for example, Erik H Erikson, & Joan Erikson, *Life Cycle Completed, Extended Version* (2013) W.W. Norton & Company; Extended Version Edition

† <http://www.clarewgraves.com>

‡ Kegan – http://hepg.org/her-home/issues/harvard-educational-review-volume-66-issue-3/herbooknote/in-over-our-heads_242, and his later work with Lahey, *Immunity to Change* on the process for personal transformation – a free online course is available to explore the approach – <http://mindsatwork.com>

§ Cook-Greuter – <http://www.cook-greuter.com> -- transitioning to www.centerforleadershipmaturity.com in summer 2014

** Brofenbrenner – <http://www.psy.cmu.edu/~sieglers/35bronfenbrenner94.pdf>

†† Available online at Amazon.com, Amazon.ca, and may be available at some local bookstores.

You can check out workshops like Creative Aging, or Transforming Beliefs at Haven on Gabriola Island in British Columbia, Canada (<http://www.haven.ca>), or other personal development centers.

You may want to do another Google search using the terms ‘aging gracefully’, ‘active aging’, ‘sage-ing’, ‘encore careers’ and other terms you may consider relevant to a positive sense of aging. Your search will yield lots of papers, books, commentaries. I found the book *Force of Character* by Hillman to be intriguing. He takes the position that because Mother Nature is efficient, there has to be some purpose to aging past our reproductive years. And the fact that we lose short term memory but keep long term memory is functional for reflecting over our lives and seeing the patterns of what kind of character we’ve expressed over time. I was a bit depressed to think that I would only learn this when it was too late to do anything about it, but that appears not to be so! It’s one of my experiences that helps me to keep an eye on my actions as an indication of ‘the person I am becoming.’ I continually ask myself, ‘Is this what I want?’ If not, I’d better be doing something about transforming the assumptions and beliefs that drive my actions!

Check back to this blog <http://positionsofinfluence.com/can-aging-be-an-opportunity> from time to time as I’ll be adding commentaries or additional resources. Let me know what you think in the comments fields, and we’ll see where this conversation takes us.

Whatever strikes you as a good direction to go concerning the aging process, than follow your instincts! After consideration of your assumptions and beliefs you may be perfectly satisfied with them. Or you may choose to do some experiments to see if there are other options you’d consider would serve you. Either way, it’s YOUR choice!

I’d like to leave you with this one last quote to ponder:

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

~ Mary Oliver