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Learning old age and learning in old age: an individual perspective

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Abstract

Learning old age has an essentially individual character since it is dependent on many different factors. The first one, is the age of a person which, as I argue by referring to personal experiences, has a huge influence on our attitude towards seniors – from the acceptance and respect for old age, to its disavowal as a mark of a declining and decrepit lifeform. The second factor, nonetheless also important, is the experience of living in a multigenerational family in which the eldest members are deemed significant and entertaining respect. Another factor that shapes our perception of seniors is the level of environmental and widely societal awareness of the significance of aging processes and of their inevitability in the life of every human being. In that matter, we are still burdened with a feeling of inferiority as those who were bound to live on until the age of seventy, eighty, and ninety. Deeply ingrained, and stemming from a bad tradition, belief that leads one to commonly associate old age as the one “on which God had failed” is very slowly being eliminated from collective consciousness. The process is enhanced by a new opening of the last phase of life which as a result of constant lengthening acquires a new dimension, followed by a new meaning. Numerous examples of old people who take care of their psycho-physical condition and their social and spiritual development are gradually retrieving old age to its rightful place in human lifespan. In this process of change, a leading role seems to be played by a person’s spiritual development whose important component is spiritual practice wherein and thanks to which old age acquires the status of life’s period not worse than its previous stages.

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Introduction

Looking at the process of aging from the perspective of someone who is approaching eighty is sensible only in so far as this person, in the course of deepened reflection, attempts to uncover the truth about his attitude to old people beginning from his childhood and about the attitude of others towards himself being at an advanced age. Such a perspective is all the more important, given that after seventy-five the process of aging accelerates, therefore – as Hellen Bee argues – it may very well be that these are the last years during which the reflection upon learning old age and learning in old age is possible (Bee, 2004, p. 567–572). The idea of our learning to be old seems particularly interesting. Accompanying it, are questions: when does an old person become a source of knowledge and wisdom? At what age, specifically, and for whom can he or she be a teacher and a mentor and attest in this way to the value of the last stage of life?

Different Evaluations of Old Age in an Individual Lifespan

During my childhood people at advanced age (grandmother, grandfather) presented a positive image of old age, taking care of their grandchildren and indulging them in various ways. They embodied seriousness and at the same time resourcefulness. Old age which they represented seemed as a stage of life worthy of respect, understanding, and love. They would often manifest knowledge carried out of rural environments which in difficult situations proved to be indispensable². The knowledge of herbs, for instance, of human shortcomings, and the general knowledge of the world obtained in their youth had a valor of something new, unknown and thus arousing children's spontaneous interest. When they shared their experiences, nobody dared to interrupt them or in any way distract the telling of the story.

In the course of time, as the grandchildren matured, the role of old people diminished. The reason for it was the visible deterioration of their psycho-physical condition and the development of aging symptoms, such as illness and declining capability in various respects. This advancing, negative image of old age made the grandchildren aware, for the first time with such brute force, of the nature of aging processes and their inevitability in their own lifespan. Therein appeared the anxiety – the fear of one's own, imagined old age.

And so, as long the children were learning to comprehend old age basing on the examples of their closest relatives as important persons in the family's life, old age may have been deemed a desirable state owing to the status accompanying it. But the same people, when young and only maturing towards adulthood yet keeping vivid memories of the dark side of aging, would change their views on old age, negating its value and significance.

2 Grandma used herbs to cure my inflamed middle ear.

One can thus say that old age became something undesired; the period of learning oldness occurred in its negative shape which resulted in dismissing the very thought of one's being old. One needs to remember, though, that fifty or sixty years ago, man after seventy and particularly after eighty was rarely to be seen and perhaps that was why he or she constituted an important point of reference for an adult person, representing for him/her a kind of *memento mori*.

We can see then, that the process of aging, in fact beginning in pre-school and school years as a way of preparing oneself to become a person of older age – someone serious and to be reckoned with – is debilitated in our youth period. Paying closer attention to the shortcomings of older people causes a peculiar mental negation of this condition especially with regard to one's own identity which often brings about a change in the behavior towards people in later periods of adulthood.

The posture of dismissing oldness intensifies as we mature to adulthood and once we enter the period of late adulthood. One's own old age seems such a distant stage of existence that the awareness of the necessity of learning to be old, for example by leading a healthy lifestyle, recedes into the background. Sure, health as an important value is for many adult people the object of care but only with regard to general well-being. It is not thought of in terms of something worth maintaining in late adulthood. Even though illness may appear from time to time and make one aware of the need to reform the lifestyle (or some of its elements, like smoking), for the majority of people it is not an incentive to motivate one to change hitherto kept habits. This situation changes radically when a serious illness in one's youth leaves lasting trace in one's system (eg. heart defect or living with only one kidney). Then the exigency to keep at least minimal comfort of living makes one prefer a more healthy lifestyle.

Old Age in the Face of Massive Tendencies to Rejuvenation

In general, old age – maybe except for cases of people having to care for old parents – disappears from the mind of adults (between twenty-two and fifty-five years old) who learn to postpone it ever forward. In the end, flooded by media images of “eternal youth” and alleged ways to achieve it, adults yield to this illusion and enter dangerous paths of combating the natural process of aging by surgical operations or the like rejuvenating endeavors. The power of the image of making oneself young again is so pervasive that paying no attention to its perils and costs, adults readily undergo medical, as well as para-medical treatments whose effects are not always beneficial.

At this point we seem to be touching the problem of the social tendency to keep one's psycho-physical and societal condition on the highest level throughout the whole human lifespan. Natural and understandable at first glance, this need, when realized permanently, does not guarantee our insusceptibility to the process of aging. Traditionally conceived oldness as the last stage of human existence is now looked upon as carrying a threat of losing that which is most valuable: health and the joy of life. But

is this grim vision correct and irrefutable? Doubtless, the lack of acceptance of old age is felt personally by every human being who passes its conventional threshold (sixty) and brings about psychical discomfort connected with the waning of one's belief in individual abilities in the face of the nearing end. We can add that this individual negative feeling is reinforced by the social perception of us, according to which we are old, not only in terms of age, but also with regard to our outlook and our behavior attributed to the late period of life. It must follow then, that our feeling of getting old is greatly influenced by other people's reaction to the whole sphere of our activities which naturally is subject to some limitations and sometimes even destruction.

The vision of old age sketched above, one which we fear the most: of old age unwanted, does not still exhaust all the possible versions of living through this stage of life and relating to its endowments and shortcomings. The new, more positive vision of old age can be built basing on the idea of learning to be old by deeper knowing and penetrating its mechanisms and specific features. The knowledge on this period of existence enhances its brighter image and helps to combat the dark vision of decrepitude awaiting us at the end of life. This rush towards learning to be of old age often appears at its threshold (Chopra 1995).

Old Age as the Subject of Spiritual Exercise (*exercitia spiritualia*)

The spiritual dimension of aging as a phenomenon, in a specific way ascribed to the last stage of human existence, carries in itself a mystery of human nature whose different aspects are subject to scientific reflection. The fear of death characteristic of the last phase of life, in the majority of cases brings to mind the feeling of loss and suffering. On the other hand, however, as Leo Buscaglia rightly argues – “it make us aware that we should live now, at this very moment, and that tomorrow is an illusion (and never comes forth)”. Death tells us that it “of no importance is how many days, hours and years we have before us, but in what way we shall use this given time” (Buscaglia, 2007, p. 126).

Why do so many people suffer because of the nearing life's end?

Beside indubitably worsening physical condition, when health problems herald for most of seventy, eighty and ninety year-olds the nearing end, of great importance is our spiritual condition, often marked by disorder and unawareness of what is lived at a given time.

It is reasonable at this point to recall the wisdom of all the classical philosophical schools which argued that “mankind's principal cause of suffering, disorder, and unconsciousness were the passions: that is, unregulated desires and exaggerated fears” (Hadot 1995, p. 83). The prevalence of anxiety and fear is, according to Cicero, an obstacle in achieving peaceful life which gains its true value only when we “get rid of our passions” (Friedmann, in: Hadot 1995, p. 83).

The period of late adulthood seems particularly fit for a human being, aware of his finitude, to undertake „spiritual exercises” (Hadot 1995) which could allow him to transform internally; in a sense rebuild his spiritual dimension along with his psychological condition. Spiritual exercises were well known in the Hellenistic and Roman era, and also in the Middle Ages they were the focus of philosophical schools. It will be helpful to cite a brief description of these exercises, as presented by Philo of Alexandria: “first attention, then meditations and ‘remembrances of good things’ then the more intellectual exercises: reading, listening, research, and investigation, and finally the more active exercises: self-mastery, accomplishment of duties, and indifference to indifferent things” (Hadot 1995, p. 84).

Attention (*prosoche*) is the fundamental Stoic spiritual attitude. It is a continuous vigilance and presence of mind, self-consciousness which never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit. Thanks to this attitude, the philosopher is fully aware of what he does at each instant, and he wills his actions fully. Thanks to his spiritual vigilance, the Stoic always has “at hand” (*procheiron*) the fundamental rule of life: that is, the distinction between what depends on us and what does not. (*ibidem*, p. 84.). Only thanks to constant vigilance are we able to concentrate on the moment that is. In this spiritual exercise mere knowledge is not what matters; we are dealing here with a “transformation of the whole personality” (*ibidem*, p. 85). The aim of meditation is to put in order our internal discourse; making it coherent and “arrange it around simple, universal principle: the distinction between what does and does not depend on us, or between freedom and nature” (*ibidem*, p. 85). Hadot goes on to argue that “We must confront life’s difficulties face to face, remembering that they are not evils, since they do not depend on us”.

At the risk of simplification, we could say that this philosophical attitude can be found today among the representatives of humanistic orientation who point out at the need to live “here and now”. F. Perls argues that present time, as the only reality we experience, is the only real one, therefore turning to the past which no longer is, or looking ahead into the future which is not yet there deprives us of the authenticity of fully participating in the world around us. Concentration on that which we currently live through does not naturally mean ridding our thoughts of any plans, dreams and memories. They cannot however function as substitutes for the present that block our conscious participation in the moment experienced “here and now” (Strumska-Cylwik 2005, p. 73). Living at present is the necessary condition of experiencing the whole scale of feelings and perceptions which daily existence brings. It is also the condition of gaining knowledge indispensable for further existence in a world whose variability and mobility directly imposes on us the necessity of being lucid and vigilant. Only then do we have the chance to develop spiritually, especially during late adulthood, when – as it was shown – the specific aura that accompanies the last stage of life promotes spiritual exercise. According to Epicurean teachings, such exercises “are required for the healing of the soul” (Hadot 1995, p. 87). Let us remember: the source of human

unhappiness is fear of things which are not worth it, as well as desiring things which do not deserve our attention. Living a life overwhelmed by anxiety caused by unnecessary fears and desires unfulfilled, people are torn in the direction of the future which "hides from [them] the incomparable value of the simple fact of existing" (ibidem, p. 88). The return to the very pleasure of existence was one of the major stakes of Greek and Roman philosophy. Such relaxed existence allows one to better tackle the fears invading human consciousness which tends to concentrate on the past or on unpredictable future. Epicurus writes: "We are born once, and cannot be born twice, but for all time must be no more. But you, who are not master of tomorrow, postpone your happiness: life is wasted in procrastination and each one of us dies overwhelmed with cares" (Epicurus, *Gnomologium Vaticanum*, § 114, in: Hadot 1995, p. 88). This is the doctrine contained in Horace's famous saying: *carpe diem*:

Life ebbs as I speak:

so seize each day, and grant the next no credit

(Horace, *Odes*, I, 11, 7, in: Hadot 1995, p. 88).

Keeping a balance between these two attitudes seems to show a way of life which can ascertain the serenity so important for normal functioning and focusing on people and problems that fill the actual existence.

Max Scheler has also underscored human ability to self-creation. He thought human being was like a microcosm – a living creature filled with spirit: "a person in whom there is a spiritual factor unfound in other living creatures which testifies to his/her autonomy against vital and psychical causality" (Scheler 1987, p. 201). Self-creation then, as the result of the advancement of human spirituality, improves the quality of our existence in the world by making us independent on „vital and psychical causality”.

The genesis of human spirituality, his development towards a higher level of understanding his own nature, as well as the nature of the surrounding world, is also the object of other researchers' interest: philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and the representatives of the natural sciences. The rapid developments in biological sciences has brought about a tendency to analyze the spiritual dimension specific for human beings from the perspective of the evolutionary paradigm (Dyk 2008, p. 243).

Among the scholars who investigate the natural determinants of human spiritual evolution it is worth citing the opinion of Konrad Z. Lorenz who regards spiritual life as a new form of being, characteristic only to humans. Pointing out to the process of evolution, he distinguishes its two types: on the one hand we have a slowly advancing biological evolution, on the other, there is a fast-paced cultural evolution. Culture as a universal sphere is a peculiar „common matrix” of disparate manifestations of human spirit. Therefore, spiritual evolution is for Lorenz "identical with the cultural one" (Lorenz 2007, p. 287). Culture, just like human spirit, gains in its process of development a supra-individual dimension as a "totality of knowing, ability and desire"

(ibidem). Utilizing the concept of human soul, Lorenz sees it as a link between human biological heritage and his spiritual sphere, since it is shaped in a cultural environment as a natural effect of the adaptation of the biological nature of man to culture he has created. It is hard not to agree with the view that human spiritual life harnesses from rich resources of culture which, created by humans, specifically reflects their spiritual aspirations,

One can say that in spiritual exercise human being has to aptly reach for the goods of culture, utilizing their potential to transform his own personality by rendering it coherent – as the ancient philosophers pictured it. Man in the period of late adulthood while he possesses an undisturbed consciousness, has good chances of attaining the feeling of the accomplishment of a certain life mission. Referring to my own lifepath, it is easy to notice that aging process, although it marks itself in the sphere of psycho-physical abilities, motivates the search for the right lifestyle and the right posture towards ever new events and existential situations. In this context, the fear of death becomes the key to a reflexive analysis of the very nature of individual being.

There remains a question concerning the ways of defending oneself against those ego-crushing opinions that negate the value of our old age and trigger the feelings of resignation and lack of belief in one's own abilities.

It seems that it is necessary to rebuild and cultivate one's awareness that this inevitable phase of living in which we find ourselves is of equal value as the previous ones. Old age needs to be affirmed amongst its specific qualities which hitherto had been lacking. It is important to see old age as an opportunity to either use the interests and knowledge so far gathered, or to develop the ones which were silenced by the rush of humdrum duties of the professional and family life.

The basis to develop a positive thinking about late adulthood is:

1. Cultivation of physical fitness on the level our strengths can allow us; a strong will which enables to perform daily exercises independently on other physical activities.
2. Practicing intellectual activity, eg. by taking up again reading classical literature, cultivating knowing activities in the field that is close to us.
3. Cultivation, if possible, of professional activity, not only the one connected with the job we once had. It effectively enhances the betterment of psycho-social condition and is the source of belief in one's abilities, It also instigates one to act in two previously discussed fields (physical and intellectual activity).

Conclusion

Learning to be old has a greatly individualized character, since it is determined by many factors. The first one is the age of a person which – as I have shown referring to personal experiences – has a huge impact on the attitudes toward seniors; from acceptance and respect, to dismissal of oldness as a declining and decrepit form of life. The second factor, of no lesser importance, is the experience connected with living

in a multigenerational family in which the eldest members are regarded as significant and entertain respect. Another factor which influences the image of seniors and their presence in social life is the level of environmental and, put more widely, social awareness of the significance of aging process and their inevitability in every human being's life. In this respect, we are burdened by *odium* of being worse; of those who were destined to live on until seventy, eighty, or ninety. This view is firmly rooted but derives from an unfortunate tradition and invites the social imagination to think of old age commonly as the one "which was God's failure". Slowly, still, but visibly it is being eliminated from the collective (un)consciousness. The process is further encouraged by the new image of life's last phase which, as a result of its prolongation, acquires a whole new dimension and new meanings. Numerous examples of old people who take care of their psycho-physical condition and their social and spiritual development are gradually retrieving old age to its rightful place in human lifespan. In this process of change, a leading role seems to be played by a person's spiritual development whose important component is spiritual practice wherein and thanks to which old age acquires the status of life's period not worse than its previous stages.

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