

"Anticipating Old Age With Assurance"

by  
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at  
Northwestern University Centennial Conference  
"Problems of An Aging Population" ...  
(9:00 P.M., Friday, June 8, 1951 ...)  
Thorne Hall, 740 Lake Shore Drive,  
Chicago, Illinois

The consideration of the question of aging and certainly the question of adjusting adequately to aging must depend upon an adequate definition of old age itself. What exactly does old age mean? We have heard innumerable examples of the wide divergence in ability between specific individuals in various age groups. We are well aware that many bosses to their subordinates must seem senile and inefficient at 45 and we all know individuals who retain a youthful attitude toward living at 70 or 75. I am somewhat embarrassed at times when my children regard me as something of a relic, ask me questions about the old days and want to know if we had electric lights when I was a boy.

Throughout our lives, it seems, we are told "you are too old" as a reason for our giving up comfortable and pleasant activities. At the time, whether it be the thumb-sucking at 2, the carefree preschool activity at 4 or the adolescent fads at 13, the weight of our age meant discomfort, insecurity and regret at leaving the warm certainties inherent in accustomed behavior. Only when we become used to the long pants, the new responsibilities and opportunities did we realize that the expanding horizons had their compensations. Those who insist on looking back never see the beauties around them or the beckoning road ahead.

It is important, therefore, to estimate the meaning of old age to the individual who either is burdened by it, possesses it, or is approaching it. Certainly, the individual who is 20 looks forward to being 30 with certain feelings and evaluations and similarly through all the decades of living. He may begin to feel that he has passed his prime when he reaches the fourth decade and he may not accept his being in the least incompetent by the time he is 85. Much depends

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upon what his past experience with older people has been. For many of us the mental picture of an old person is, say, your grandfather; an individual who is dogmatic, rather fierce, somewhat frightening, often mildly untidy, possessing, as I have read somewhere, the sort of beard into which you could pour a cup of coffee and drink it on the way to the train. Sometimes a memory of this sort is so persistent that an individual never feels mature and has a tendency to think of other people in terms of their being older than he. Consequently, it comes as something of a shock to him when he is forced to recognize that people whom he had regarded as his contemporaries are treating him with the respect which he had thought was earned only by advancing years.

It is obvious that these values, both of the individual and his age, depend upon the experiences and value judgments which the individual has made during his life. We have said that the social structure itself does not have an adequate valuation system for the older person and consequently we shall restrict ourselves to a consideration of the individual's value to himself and to that segment of society with which he is most intimately concerned, usually his family.

Initially, of course, an individual is taught his value and the value of the things he does. This is usually accomplished by his parents in their early training and all too often depends upon the value judgments which they hand on to him. No great harm is done if these are consistent with those of the social structure outside the individual, but some harm may be done if the parents are attempting to live out two lives, making up in their children for the deficiencies they experienced in their own living. No one can criticize a parent who attempts to instill in his children a love of music, but some criticism is due the mother who, herself a disappointed concert soprano, teaches her daughter that a concert career is the only real good in life. And certainly the daughter is destined for

unhappiness if, without adequate vocal equipment, she nonetheless places all her estimate of herself in terms of getting applause and appreciation from some sort of audience. Recently, I saw a young woman who had achieved recognition in early childhood because she was blonde and cute. She is now heading toward a rather unhappy 40 because she is still attempting to be blonde and cute when neither her coloring nor her architecture lends itself well to this method of dealing with her environment.

Marked for disappointment also is the individual whose value of himself is in terms of his value to his family; i.e., the person who is a perpetual child or a perpetual parent, for example. A mother who tells herself that she is useful so long as she can be of service to her children is bound to find the entire structure of her security rocked to its foundation when she comes face to face with the fact that her children no longer need her. Many of these parents make an attempt to keep their children childlike for as long as possible, simply in order to maintain their own security. This delusion is not restricted to mothers. There are many fathers who cannot tolerate maturity in their children because it is inevitable that as my children grow older I must also be growing older. Since I do not like growing older, I may deny to myself advancing maturity of my children.

Survival is, of course, the chief aim of all organisms and these various adaptive mechanisms are simply the individual's way of dealing with his environment and maintaining his existence. His adaptiveness will be more or less successful as his adaptive mechanisms are more or less flexible unless he can maintain himself in a situation in which the stresses are always predictable and therefore constant. As long as his physical and mental vigor remain constant and he can maintain himself in that static relationship with his environment, his adjustment, however precarious, will continue to be adequate.

With the advance of years, however, and the slowing down of physical and

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mental vigor which accompanies this inevitable part of the living process, the individual may find himself forced to make changes in himself and in his attitudes for which he is not prepared.

In such a situation the individual has only two choices; either to deny to himself the fact that his adaptive mechanisms no longer apply blindly repeating his ineffective behavior; or to withdraw within himself and spend his days ruminating about the time when his adaptive mechanism would work. His failures he must then blame on the lack of understanding, sympathy or intelligence in the social situation surrounding him.

In women these maneuvers often take the form of various types of supportive and restrictive garments and a more liberal use of coal-tar products; while in men the tendency, with the loss of physical and sexual ability, is to reminisce about past glories or to overextend oneself in an attempt to keep up with the parade which one feels is passing him by.

A fairly frequent complaint given by an individual who is facing this particular problem is the loss of sexual interest. Careful checking will often reveal the fact that the individual concerned is comparing his present ability with his remembered ability which is likely to be somewhat different than the actual situation. The man of 50 or 60 can inject a good deal of wishful thinking and imagination into his remembered prowess at 20.

An additional factor in the whole problem is the realistic rejection by society and also by the family of the older person. In days when the family living centered around the home, three-generation houses were the rule rather than the exception and, as has been frequently pointed out, the grandparents could often occupy themselves self-sufficiently in a part of the home which would be out of the main stream of family traffic. Such a situation is hardly possible in the present two-generation home where the introduction of a third generation soon results in

overcrowding and resultant irritation. This irritation is increased by the necessity to maintain the convention that parents and children automatically like each other throughout all their lives and consequently the entire situation is likely to be carried on in an air of armed neutrality which is most distressing to all concerned. In such a situation, with hostilities building up, each of the antagonists denies his antagonism and the quarrel is often displaced to some external situation. Unfortunately, a minor physical illness or even minor psychiatric changes in the old person are all too often used as an excuse for his removal to a nursing home with the well known tragic results.

It is well known that we tolerate change poorly as we grow older and no one who has had any contact whatsoever with mental hospitals can fail to have been impressed by the miserable older people who occupy a quarter to a third of the beds. They are confused by their being uprooted from a familiar situation; they have lost their old friends and find themselves in a peculiar and impersonal environment which is disturbing to them. It is not at all strange that under these circumstances their already failing powers decline rapidly until death mercifully relieves them from a difficult situation they cannot understand.

Of some importance, too, is the picture which the individual has of himself. This was mentioned in passing in connection with the picture one might have of one's self as a parent. There are individuals, also, who think of themselves as being (say) efficient executives or brilliant conversationalists, or irresistible Casanovas. Without this particular picture the individual cannot conceive of himself as existing at all. Consequently, he resists with every bit of his energy any evidence that tends to prove that he is no longer as dynamic or as brilliant or as irresistible as he once was. And once these depressing facts are borne in on the individual his world collapses in pitiful shreds around him.

Taking the point of view that we must -- and can -- provide our own assurance

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for our old age, we may apply some of these thoughts to our individual situations. First of all, one's adaptive mechanisms, almost by definition, must be adaptive in the true sense of the word. It does little good if one has learned only one way of dealing with situations. It is a wise and flexible person who knows when to be aggressive and when to be complacent; when to run and when to fight; when to be neat and when to allow himself to get dirty; when to be thorough and when to be superficial. But the individual who has only one response, for example, to be aggressive, may find himself in situations where his aggressiveness is completely ineffective. In such a case, he has no choice except to repeat or perhaps even increase his aggressiveness, wasting his energy and accomplishing nothing.

Old age is not obviously the time to learn these various alternative methods of dealing with situations. It is well known that older people, and this includes individuals above the age of 40 (or 30 for that matter), do not learn as rapidly or as well as they did when they were younger. Though I do not mean to indicate a defeatist attitude toward environmental manipulation and some alteration in the attitudes of the older person as treatment possibilities in many of the difficulties which beset them, it is nonetheless true that preparation for old age must begin as early as possible, preferably in childhood.

This preparation must, as do all things in the growing-up process, begin with the parents. As parents, we must assure ourselves that we are teaching our children patterns of living which, in the first place, do not simply reflect our own needs, but give some thought to the individual needs of our children; and in the second place, are flexible enough so that changing stresses will not force the young trainee to continue blindly to repeat an inefficient pattern. Furthermore, the child should be taught to develop his values for himself. He should not depend for his security on his position in the family constellation since this may change at any time and will inevitably change with the passage of the years.

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The individual, as he attains maturity, must examine critically his own behavior in order to determine its efficiency in the changing social and occupational situations. If a given method of approach to a problem does not achieve results, the individual must be sufficiently self-critical to enable him to change his method of approach and attempt to achieve results in some other way. He must be willing to accept the fact that his interests and abilities are going to change from decade to decade and that this does not necessarily represent a deteriorating process but merely a re-evaluation and a readjustment of these attitudes and interests.

We are all familiar with the picture of the individual, who having retired after looking forward to the time when he "could do all the things he had always wanted to", finds himself in a situation where he has made no preparation for doing any of these things. He cannot suddenly reverse his method of living and overnight acquire hobbies and interests. Hobbies and interests must be developed in the years prior to the time of retirement for them to have any real value in the lives of the individuals.

There are, of course, innumerable examples of successful individuals in this field, but the illustration which occurs to me is that of two old ladies who live in Southern California. Both are nearly 80 and have been widowed for some years. One runs a successful business at the present time; and the other acts as housekeeper and does the marketing, cooking, etc. Since I have known them, they have been intensely interested in some five or six religious cults of the sort that are rampant in Southern California; they have attempted at various times to raise goldfish, frogs and other forms of wild life, and enthusiastically investigated the results of an all-vegetable diet. On the last occasion when I visited them they were making elaborate plans to buy portable fluorescent lamps and go out into the desert rock-hunting. They are far too busy with new ideas and interests over to become bored with living. I have a feeling that unlike old soldiers, they will

never fade away. They will simply go "bang" some day and not be here any more. Until that day, "old age" is simply a pair of words to them with no real meaning in their very active and happy lives.

We should like, I am sure, to feel that social changes can be brought about which will render the status of our old people much more satisfactory and less ignored by our culture. Certainly, a great deal of constructive work is being directed to this very end. There are clubs, there are community activities, there are industrial experiments of one kind or another, in which the accumulated wisdom of the older person is being put to real use and he is being given the sensation without which no one of us can continue to exist, namely, the feeling of being worth something to himself and to his fellows.

It is essential that welfare and other social organizations make every attempt to retain the older person in as familiar a setting as possible. It is extremely worthwhile that movements are under way to provide interests compatible with the energies and abilities of the older person and surroundings in which they can work out those interests with some pleasure to themselves and joy in the companionship attached to those interests.

Also of great importance are the various mental hygiene plans which involve instructing families in the proper attitudes toward their children and individuals in their attitudes toward themselves.

But all of these things will take time. We should work on them, to be sure; and those of us who are in a position to implement some of these ideas in terms of the organizations which we represent should use all possible effort to see that those very forward-looking ideas are carried out.

There is, however, one thing which we can do ourselves and within ourselves, and that is to examine our own living, recalling that old age will one of these days be a very personal problem to most of us. However, well we may plan our

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financial security, we must remember that we are in a situation in which we will be in a position of competing with younger individuals and at times ~~being~~ resented by them. Our only defense in such a case is to be sure to see to it that within ourselves we have sufficient integrity and sufficient elasticity in our dealings with our environments to be able to tolerate changing stresses without our structures collapsing.

As Ayn Rand in the Fountainhead puts it, "Degrees of ability vary, but the basic principle remains the same. Degree of a man's independence, initiative and personal love for his work determines his talent as a worker and his worth as a man. Independence is the only gauge of human virtue and value -- what a man is and makes of himself -- there is no substitute for human dignity."