Virtue and Age

The last years of life, many commentators remark, make up “a season in search of its purposes,” for us “emptied of cultural and social meaning.”[[1]](#endnote-1) As Simone de Beauvoir notes, retirement parties are not initiation rites: unlike baptism or marriage, bar mitzvahs or vision quests, retirement marks not a beginning but a culmination. Other stages of life carry rights, obligations, and ideals: a common understanding of what one should seek and the authority one needs in its pursuit. But retirement and old age, in 21st century North America, are seen at best as a drawn out vacation, followed by lamentable decline, preferable only to the alternative.

Donald Hall, fourteenth poet laureate of the United States, describes the way in which, in his eighties, and like everyone else of that age, he is occasionally treated. Except to his friends and family, he is essentially Other. Condescension, meant kindly, is nevertheless an assertion of power. Wheeled through the Smithsonian, he stops for lunch with his companion. Afterward a guard bends over to address him, “wags his finger, smiles a grotesque smile, and raises his voice to ask, ‘Did we have a nice din-din?’"

“At a family dinner, my children and grandchildren pay fond attention to me; I may be peripheral, but I am not invisible. A grandchild's college roommate, encountered for the first time, pulls a chair to sit with her back directly in front of me, cutting me off from the family circle: I don't exist.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

On the other hand, much in Hall’s personal and inner life is richly satisfying. I will return to what he has to say about that. Here the point is the lack of cultural place, and respect.

Other cultures have seen old age differently, in a wide variety of ways, often but not always better. In situations of scarcity the elderly have sometimes been abandoned or killed.[[3]](#endnote-3) But in many cultures a term like “elder” exists, and expresses respect. One African society says that the death of an elder is like the loss of a library. For Buddhists, old age is a time for spiritual growth, and therefore for mentorship.[[4]](#endnote-4) There are cultures in which elders wield real, occasionally oppressive, power.

A common factor in respect (and its lack) is whether the old are seen as useful; what counts as useful of course depends on what a culture values. The losses in old age are clear: Energy, physical strength, and cognitive power all decline. If a society values only those attributes, respect for elders will be harder.

My project in this paper is to articulate what is of value in old age, for elders themselves, but also for the rest of society; then to identify virtues one needs as one ages in order to achieve those goods. Finally I will discuss briefly the sorts of social and economic structures that make these communally valuable character traits most likely, and most appreciated.

There have been various approaches to these questions. Perhaps the most attractive is that with age should come wisdom, distilled from a long life, and given to future generations. William Thomas argues that wisdom requires surrendering one’s earlier claims to expertise, which by the nature of things is increasingly outdated. He is not entirely clear, however, on what counts as wisdom, beyond the assertion that it will be imparted through stories.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Erik Erikson also invests in the idea of wisdom. The stages of psychosocial development that he developed have been immensely influential; unlike earlier developmental schemes, which ended at adulthood, Erikson’s extends throughout the lifespan. Each stage is described in terms of conflict, whose successful resolution counts as a virtue. After 65 or so, the conflict is between integrity and despair; its successful resolution results in wisdom.

I will say more about Erikson’s scheme later. But as for the general belief, or hope, that with age comes wisdom, empirical work raises considerable doubt. To begin with, wisdom is hard to define and difficult to measure; where social scientists have tried to do so, they have not found it increasing with age.[[6]](#endnote-6) What some call “gerotranscendence” may best be seen as desirable rather than as natural.

Another approach to virtue in age is more pragmatic. Edward Vacek draws from the priorities gerontologists have identified in healthy aging. There is no official consensus in the field, but emphasis generally goes to four priorities. First is continuity (most elders continue much of what they have been doing); then, new beginnings (many older people take up new projects); thirdly, disengagement (most will need to surrender aspects of their earlier life); and finally completion, some form of which is needed by everyone. For each of these Vacek identifies correlative virtues, among them generosity, humility, and trust. In a culture which treats the old sentimentally (when it doesn’t simply ignores them) Vacek also makes the bracing observation that while our culture “sanctimoniously demands that burdened single mothers get a job” it also suggests “that healthy, educated, experienced, talented retirees should have no demands put on them.” Vacek cites Marc Freedman’s finding that elders spend less time on volunteer work than any other age group.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Both Erikson and Vacek have significant things to say about virtue and age. My own approach will be less intuitive than Erikson’s and more systematic than Vacek’s. I examine what it means to have an age, simply as such, but also for a biological organism, and especially for beings aware of time. I argue that our conscious relatedness to our own past, present, and future presents existential challenges. Meeting them requires virtue. This awareness, and the demands it places on virtue, arise at every age, but take distinctive forms in each.

Lastly I will briefly discuss the virtues required in the young if they are to recognize and support fulfillment in the old, along with the ways in which social structures help or impede. But first I need to explore what it means to grow old—and before that, what it means to have an age, any age.

**Theorizing Age**

Progressive theorists and activists often list social categories in which oppression and injustice can be recognized, studied, and resisted. The almost canonical list is race, gender, and class; recently (dis)ability and sexual orientation have been included as well. Occasionally age is added, but little attention has been paid to it. Effective political action is strengthened by solid theoretical work, and for age this too is missing. The standard categories have for years been intensely analyzed: how is gender different from biological sex? What counts as disability, and why? What does “race” mean, and how does the category function? And so on. But age is essentially untheorized. If mentioned at all, it is treated as an obvious, and simply biological, concept.

Demographic change – the old are an unprecedented and increasingly large fraction of the population – is forcing more political attention, although unfortunately this is often framed as a struggle between generations.[[8]](#endnote-8) The fundamental questions of what it means to have an age, and what it means to be old, are rarely raised. My thoughts in this chapter are indebted to a handful of philosophers, some sociologists and a passionate geriatrician.

There are two questions worth attention: What does it mean to have an age at all; and what does it mean to be old? As Leni Marshall points out, “the concept of old is [being] renumbered” (it starts in one’s 80s, rather than at 65) but “not revalued.”[[9]](#endnote-9) Her point is supported by web searches: “Aging” will yield almost solely “anti-aging.” “Successful aging” usually means “not getting old.” Those results express the assumption that aging is always and only decline.

This paper is a step toward theorizing age in order to revalue old age. I start with a fundamental conceptual point: Age *simpliciter* is by definition a point on a spectrum. The earth has an age; the God of monotheism does not. It follows that each specific age is in relationship to all the others. (Something similar is true of “race,” a term of separation and contrast; and of “sex”: there are asexual species, but not unisexual ones.) An age is the leading edge of a trajectory through a span of time. For everything except possibly the universe itself, that span is finite. Since time is a measure of change, to have an age is to have changed. For biological organisms the change is relatively fast and obvious. For human beings still more is true: we are aware of all this, of having a past and a finite future, of having changed and continuing to do so.

What philosophical work has been done on the concept of age, unsurprisingly, addresses issues of justice; those questions have dominated social theory for decades, essentially since Rawls’ *Theory of Justice.* Along those lines sociologist Toni Calasanti has developed a theory of age relations, the privileging of some periods of life at the expense of others (notably, of midlife at the expense of late life).[[10]](#endnote-10) With her colleagues Kathleen F. Slevin and Neal King she notes important intersectionalities. Black men, for instance, are more likely to be poor in their later years than are white women. Older black women are more likely to see themselves as sexual than older white women.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Such questions and findings are crucial. My own project, however, is different. I focus only on age, and not on relations of privilege but on a moral relation of (possible) mutual enrichment. Put most simply, I argue that a revaluing of old age would, first and most obviously, be good for elders; but just as significantly it would free those who are younger from fear of age, and give them tools for living more fully throughout their lives. I focus on what I call temporal existential tasks, arising from the uniquely human awareness of past and future. The tasks take different shapes at different points in life; successfully accomplishing them is a matter of virtue. The form these challenges take in old age is germane to the form they take in youth and midlife. But before the non-old can learn from the old, the old must be noticed.

A point about language. I often use “old” and “old age,” a vocabulary Beauvoir would approve.[[12]](#endnote-12) Her society, like our own, tended to avoid the blunt facts of old age, and to choose euphemisms instead: “senior citizens,” “prime time,” and so on. But progressive movements change language, and I will follow Kate Lindeman, William Thomas, and others who wish to restore the words “elder” and “elderhood,” not as euphemisms, but as assertions that this period of life should be respected.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Age is a point on a temporal spectrum; old age is a point toward the end of a biological span. Old age can be seen simply as a time of constant loss. Geriatrician William Thomas calls this the “declinist” view, and rejects it. His argument goes like this: Physiologically, what happens in old age is different from what happens in childhood and midlife; the ability to repair tissue damage and respond to stress decreases. But, Thomas points out, the processes of childhood—constantly increasing head circumference, height, and weight—stop in adulthood; it’s a good thing that they do, and the “loss” of constant bodily enlargement is a good thing—not a decline.[[14]](#endnote-14)

This is clever, but not persuasive. Most of the physical changes of old age are simply losses, and can’t be seen as anything else. (I describe them more fully below). They are losses because they make it more difficult to do many of the things that are typical of a full human life, including moving and, often, thinking. But Thomas’s underlying point is correct: For the full human being, and not just the biological human being, the losses in old age are the conditions of possibility for other kinds of gains, among them a very particular spaciousness and serenity. Because of this, learning to let go, to surrender what one no longer has, is a necessary condition for each of the virtues I will describe. But the relationship is reciprocal: Each virtue also makes it easier to relinquish what one must.

Elders, like everyone past early childhood, are aware of their relationship to time. We understand that we have a past and a future, different from the present, and that others do as well. This awareness presents existential tasks, moral challenges. They are cherishing the present, accepting the past, and attending to the future. Those challenges have a distinctive shape in one’s later years, but the difference is one of degree, not of kind.

1. **Cherishing the Present: Learning to Let Go**

For many, aging is simply loss: the body degenerates, and one’s future is relatively short. This is the point of view that Thomas calls “declinist.”[[15]](#endnote-15) But one’s later years are also a time of fulfillment. Since loss is a constant throughout life, everyone at earlier stages could learn from the shape the way elders, at least exemplary elders, deal with it.

The losses that come with age are real, and ever more salient. In physical terms, aging really is simply loss. Strength, flexibility, endurance, vision, all steadily diminish. Youthful looks are gone. (Strictly speaking this is a change rather than a loss; aged faces can be seen as beautiful, in a distinctive way. Iconic pictures of Albert Einstein and Mother Teresa demonstrate that possibility. In our culture, though, recognition of beauty in an aged face, especially a female one, is quite uncommon.) Death, too, is a closer companion. The loss of friends, spouses and siblings, shocking and tragic in midlife, becomes more common, less surprising; sad but rarely tragic.

Most of these losses are biological givens. Others are socially contingent. Joan M. Erikson, Erik’s lifelong collaborator and finally his widow, finished their last book alone. Having survived into her 90s, she identified a Stage Nine to complete the eight they had formulated together. In this last stage frailty becomes pronounced, and the lack of a social role painful. One must renegotiate the earlier developmental tasks of retaining autonomy in spite of physical dependence, and claiming one’s place in the world. These losses, of autonomy and of social role, have little positive side. But they are made easier if one has developed the virtue of cherishing the present.

Finally, and again a given, is the loss of possibility. Of the hopes and dreams of youth, some have been accomplished, some must be put aside. I deal more with this challenge when I talk about accepting the past, elderhood’s second temporal existential task. For now let me note that putting goals aside--like clearing a desk--creates space and possibility. Some people in their later years develop new talents and new goals, and that’s a fine thing. But there cannot be the breadth of possibility there once was. Most elders in some way slow down, simplify, and learn to savor what remains. What seems at first solely a loss—of limitless possibility—can be one side of a coin whose other side is peace, a clear gain.

And so, I will argue, for most of the losses listed here: each has a positive dimension, largely unremarked. Whether the positive outweighs the negative is not my concern; the answer probably differs from person to person, situation to situation. My project is identifying the positive.

Most fundamentally, the changes that come with age require, *and foster*, a greater appreciation of the present. A slower body makes it more attractive to savor what is here, now. Diminished energy makes one less likely to engage in competition, which is to say, less likely to see others as rivals, and less likely to ignore what one presently has for the sake of future gain. Loss of sight and hearing are hard, but an essential tool in accepting the loss is an appreciation of what remains, with an immersion in the present. As Donald Hall puts it, “...old age is a ceremony of losses . . . When I lament and darken over my diminishments, I accomplish nothing. It's better to sit at the window all day, pleased to watch birds, barns, and flowers. It is a pleasure to write about what I do.”[[16]](#endnote-16) He does so eloquently; he no longer writes poetry, but his prose is that of a poety.

Immersion in the present is a source of nourishment throughout life. It characterizes childhood, but becomes harder as one settles into adulthood. Deadlines, multitasking, responsibilities, all create a cluttered and distracted inner landscape. Yet there are jewel-like times. One of the joys of caring for small children, for instance – when one has enough time, energy, and money – is being able to share their absorption in the present. One of the joys of work is what Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi calls “flow,” an absorption in the task at hand, “beyond boredom and anxiety.”[[17]](#endnote-17) Lucky adults have this experience often, but in early and middle adulthood one must often press through each task for the sake of the next.

Immersion in the present is, or could be, increasingly common as we age. Many report the sort of experience Hall describes. The final stage of elderhood is the most likely to be filled with peaceful awareness. As Martin Grotjahn put it, in “The Day I Got Old,”

“I don’t work anymore. I don’t walk anymore. Peculiarly enough, I feel well about it . . . I sit in the sun watching the falling leaves slowly sail across the waters . . . . I think, I dream, I draw, I sit . . . . That a walk across the street to the corner of the park satisfies me . . . that surprises me.”[[18]](#endnote-18)

Joan Erikson made a similar point: “‘I am profoundly moved, for I am growing old and feel shabby, and suddenly great riches present themselves and enlighten every part of my body and reach out to beauty everywhere.”[[19]](#endnote-19) Paul Claudel: “Eighty years old! No eyes left, no ears, no teeth, no legs, no wind! And when all is said and done, how astonishingly well one does without them!”[[20]](#endnote-20)

In a better world experiences like these would not be a surprise; everyone would understand that this contentment lies ahead, and look forward to it. People do look forward to retirement, but the anticipation is narrow: hope for relief from the problems of midlife, and for its enjoyments without its problems. What Grotjahn, Erikson, and Claudel describe is different; it is fulfillment not through activity but through contemplation. Of course their experience is not guaranteed. It requires some good fortune; chronic pain, among other factors, interferes mightily. But the pleasures they describe are possible for many, and their contingency may be all the more reason to name them, celebrate them, and try to make them possible for everyone.

I will call cherishing the present a virtue: a habit that enriches life and is at least in part acquired, not simply given. This virtue requires, most fundamentally, letting go of what is gone. Doing so is obviously not easy. It is helped by an acknowledgement of transience, the most elemental truth in life. Everything that one has will someday be gone–everything. Recognizing that fact can be hard; it is an ongoing process and always a matter of degree. It requires habitual inner honesty. But awareness of transience makes what one has all the more precious, and can ease the pain of loss: One is somewhat prepared. Closely tied to that awareness is recognizing the limits of one’s ability to control life. That ability is greatest in adulthood, but never anywhere close to complete, and inevitably diminishes in old age. It is helpful to arrive in elderhood with that awareness already well-established.

Parenthood can be a powerful preparation for recognizing both impermanence and the limits of personal control. The years of parenting couple immersion in the present with constant change: infancy ends, childhood vanishes, adolescents are suddenly adults. The transience built into child-rearing is, unlike some other losses, natural and inevitable, and its final result good: One’s children have become adults, ideally leading happy and meaningful lives. But the other understanding offered by parenthood is how much of a child’s life is beyond parental control.

So consciousness of limits and of change before old age help one prepare for it; conversely, a greater appreciation of elderhood would help everyone acknowledge transience and limits.

Virtues are not just individual achievements; they are helped or impeded by society at large. For the virtue of cherishing the present, security and respect are important underpinnings. To start with, constantly anxiety makes it hard to settle into the present moment. Preparing for one’s old age, financially and otherwise, is morally as well as practically useful. But few people can do this solely on their own; social arrangements are also crucial. In the United States these systems are constantly evolving. Family care has always been dominant, here as elsewhere, but not everyone has a family and not every family can provide constant intensive care. (Small nuclear families in which both parents are employed, or in which there is only one adult, can find elder care particularly challenging.) Public elder care began with almshouses, which gave way to nursing homes; in time assisted living and various forms of home health care emerged.[[21]](#endnote-21) For those who are relatively affluent a variety of continuing care retirement centers have developed; typically one enters while able-bodied, and then can move to assisted living or nursing home units if more care becomes necessary. More institutional innovation needs to happen, and is under way.

What also helps in appreciating the present is knowing that one has left, in some sense, a legacy, and so can put aside the struggle for further accomplishment. The operative word here is struggle, in the sense of unpleasant, compulsory effort. Many elders work happily until the day they die, if their strength allows it. But ideally they do so for the satisfaction of work rather than out of a sense of incompleteness. (I discuss this further in section three, which concerns a virtuous stance toward the future.) Just as physical security is rarely accomplished purely by one’s own efforts, so a sense of having given significantly to others often depends on their respect and recognition.

Here the concept of filial piety arises. There is little work on the subject in recent Western philosophy; most of what there is arises from Aquinas’s treatment of *pietas*, a proper gratitude and deference toward those who are the source of our being.[[22]](#endnote-22) A very similar concept is found in Confucianism, transliterated as *hsaio* or *xiao[[23]](#endnote-23).* Those who romanticize Asian traditions accuse us, too easily, of warehousing our elderly rather than caring for them. This is generally not true, and in any case differences in family structure and the availability of care outside the family change what is best, for caregivers as well as the elderly themselves.[[24]](#endnote-24) But in any case my concern is with something more subtle, with attitudes. In the many decades since Freud, a far too common stance is to see parents, particularly mothers (almost always the primary caregiver) as the source of our emotional problems. The converse, that adult children can hurt their parents, is almost unnoted. In fiction and biography, in humor and in conversation, the custom is not only to attribute our problems to inadequate mothering, but to see mothers as problems now: Visits and phone calls are treated wryly; everyone knows what trials they can be. Elders’ desire to be involved with their grandchildren is regarded anxiously; it can become interference. When elders become infirm, most adult children feel obliged to help and do so at considerable cost. But before that we have (or at least express, culturally) little sense of respect and gratitude; only of duty. Parents take pride in their grown children, but they do have to take it: credit is not spontaneously given.

The issue is broader than parents and adult children. A widespread recognition that most elders have done something important—by having raised children, held jobs, paid taxes and lived honestly--is missing. Not every elder deserves this credit, of course; there are scofflaws and shiftless in every generation. But the assumption of respect (rather than simply kindess, let alone condescension) is necessary and generally missing.

The virtue of cherishing the present, then, is supported externally by a reasonable degree of physical security and a general assumption that one has proved worthy. Inwardly the virtue is nourished by an acceptance of transience and awareness of the limits of personal control.

Like the first temporal existential task, the second—an orientation toward the past--takes a particular form in elderhood, but is a challenge and a useful achievement for everyone.

**(2) Accepting the Past: Creating Meaning**

Human beings remember. Starting in childhood we make stories about ourselves, explaining who we are by what we have been. The old (along with the young) are particularly likely to reflect on their lives.[[25]](#endnote-25) For the young, remembering is a search for identity; among elders, for meaning and peace. The Eriksons[[26]](#endnote-26) (writing in mid-life, before they themselves were old) identified life review as the final developmental task: “Did I live a meaningful life?”[[27]](#endnote-27) Their eight stages have become canonical, and this last stage is often parsed in terms of one’s accomplishments: If proud of them, one develops wisdom. In the face of failure, bitterness and despair arise.

This shorthand version is unappealing. The blunt question, “Have I lived a meaningful life?” invites a simple yes or no answer; if the answer is determined by the goals of one’s youth, a negative answer is almost guaranteed, and with it--on this facile construction--despair. What the Eriksons meant was, of course, deeper and more nuanced. They meant that in later life there is a need to look back, and integrate the positive and the negative into a meaningful whole.

The Eriksons’ Stage Eight is one source of the current interest in narrative identity and therapy, and of narrative theory. French structuralists cite the work of Roland Barthes and others; within Anglo-American philosophy Alastair MacIntyre is still more important.[[28]](#endnote-28) For all these reasons the concept of narrative has been increasingly important in recent decades. Predictably, and usefully, the concept and its various uses are now being contested. A major discussion involves the usefulness of narrative in addressing philosophical issues of personal identity.[[29]](#endnote-29) Related, often overlapping, discussions concern the nature of narrative explanation, and the extent to which we do, and should, construct life narratives.[[30]](#endnote-30)

I need not enter into most of these debates. All parties agree that understanding human experience requires understanding their temporal context: Marya Schechtman notes, for instance, the difference between working on a finite task for which there will be a reward is different from endless work into which one has been coerced.[[31]](#endnote-31) Everyone agrees that human beings think about their past, in varying degrees, and place the memories in some sort of temporal, causal, and often emotional context.[[32]](#endnote-32) Most writers concur that we have multiple stories about parts of our lives; there is some disagreement about how much unity these stories must have.[[33]](#endnote-33) Few, however, believe that our stories taken together constitute grand narratives fitting a classic genre (tragedy, romance, quest, etc.). As Dan P. McAdams puts it, we have many “self-stories,” nested and overlapping; “a kind of anthology of the self.”[[34]](#endnote-34) No single grand narrative captures our identity, but narrative is nevertheless essential. We create unity, purpose, and meaning through it.

The disagreement relevant to my project concerns the degree to which it is morally desirable to pay attention to one’s past, care about it, try to make sense of it. Galen Strawson reports that he rarely does; “I have absolutely no sense of my life as a narrative with form, or indeed as a narrative without form. Absolutely none. Nor do I have any great or special interest in my past. Nor do I have a great deal of concern for my future.”[[35]](#endnote-35) He does not experience his self as persisting through time. He is convinced “that the best lives almost never involve [the] kind of self-telling” that narrative theorists endorse. As for himself, “I’m completely uninterested in . . . the question . . . ‘What have I made of my life?’ I’m living it, and this sort of thinking . . . is no part of it.”[[36]](#endnote-36)

Schechtman responds to all this by distinguishing “selves” from “persons,” and both from human beings. Persons live within a personal history that gives meaning to what they do: they approach one house rather than another because it is theirs. They pay a mortgage because they signed a contract in the past and hope for a future financial result. Such understandings may be far in the background of their consciousness, but are operative whenever we answer questions like “Why are you here?” and “What are you going to do next?” Strawson recognizes all this. Schechtman’s “selves,” in contrast, are the subjects of present experience. Everyone has a “person narrative”; not everyone has much of a “self-narrative,” i.e., not only recognizes her past, but identifies with and cares about it.

Human beings, then, have a past, remember some of it, and have a stance toward it. The stance varies greatly from person to person. Even those like Strawson who claim almost complete indifference to their past and future are nevertheless exercised by past embarrassments and by the prospect of their own deaths.[[37]](#endnote-37) Schechtman argues that owning and inhabiting the past is a good thing, a requirement for a flourishing life. Strawson disagrees, but has his own stance: indifference, except for what is discomfiting. The question, then, is whether some attitudes toward the past are morally more desirable than others.

With Schechtman, I hold that some degree of interest is a good thing. This ability to identify with and care about one’s past–not all of it, by any means, and certainly not in one unified grand narrative–enriches life. Memory without concern, expectation without interest, she argues, would be a recipe for alienation. The phenomenological self is “fluid and amorphous”: We find past events and emotions suddenly, surprisingly salient.[[38]](#endnote-38) But Schechtman acknowledges that she lacks an adequate definition of alienation, and considers the support she offers for concern for one’s past to be promissory notes rather than arguments. I would supplement her promissory notes with these observations: Understanding and accepting one’s past bears rich fruit, in less defended, less obscured, freer and fuller self-understanding. With that comes a greater acceptance of others. Such acceptance benefits the others, but also oneself: One more barrier falls.

Schechtman, endorsing an interest in one’s past, describes ways to do so: looking at old photographs, attending reunions, maintaining holiday traditions, “and in various other ways stock up on the madeleines and tea that aid in recovering lost time.”[[39]](#endnote-39) It’s hard to imagine doing these things as a conscious effort toward developing virtue. At best one might decide that a fuller view of one’s own life, a taking stock, would be morally useful. But in late life such activities are increasingly common and often not optional. One moves house, for instance, and must sort out what to keep and to discard; friends die, and memories of what one has shared arise. One sees generations of children grow up, one’s own and others, and recognizes patterns, remembers hopes and fears. Events in the news, and in one’s personal life, are reminders of the past: They mirror one another, or help explain one another. The larger one’s store of memories, the more likely are such resemblances and connections.

If virtue is by definition to some extent consciously sought, and I’m right in claiming that integrating one’s past is an important part of moral growth, what is the moral task here? I part company with Schechtman: Seeking out one’s own “tea and madeleines” is not required, although it may at times be useful. The more fundamental task, and a subtler one, is increasing one’s openness to one’s past as it is evoked by the present. This is close to the kind of inner work that humility requires: a recognition of resistance, and a conscious relaxation of it.

No unified account of one’s life is required, or usually possible. The Eriksons’ highly influential stage theory must be modified, particularly in its more conventional expressions. The challenge at this stage is not asking whether one accomplished one’s earlier goals. Goals evolve, and everyone looks back on both failure and success. The task instead is recognizing and accepting both, and integrating them into a fuller understanding of oneself. Doing so with failures is not easy, but neither is it always easy to recognize, accept, and integrate one’s successes. Unrealistic expectations can make ordinary achievements seem unimportant. Being at peace with, and taking ownership of one’s past demands the same “letting go” that is required for cherishing the present. Self-deception can interfere, as can the fear that underlies self-deception. Aristotle called friendship a virtue, and one of the many reasons to agree with him is the fact that a listening partner—in the form of an individual or a community--is helpful in coming to terms with fuller self-accounts.[[40]](#endnote-40)

It also helps to realize that our histories are shaped not only by the choices we made but by the world in which we lived. Here political analysis—especially, I would claim, feminist and other progressive work--becomes crucial. It reveals the ideology and the material constraints in which, and against which, elders made their choices. It contextualizes and diffuses personal responsibility.

An essential task of elderhood is being open to all of this, forging a resilient, honest, comfortable sense of self. And like the first existential challenge, accepting the past is required throughout life. It is more pressing in old age, and those younger could learn from the efforts of elders.

**(3) Investing in the World As It Will Go On Without Us**

The third task of elderhood concerns the future. One’s personal future, in old age, is relatively short. But the world will go on without us; the sense that the world’s future is, in some sense, our own, expands our horizons and allows for many kinds of hope. Those hopes can be invested in the next generations, and in one’s work, and in the environment, i.e., the physical world around us.

The generations after us include our children and grandchildren, our students, younger colleagues, neighbors, friends—and even strangers. It’s not only teachers who “Touch Eternity”; everyone does, to varying degrees. This is especially true, of course, for parents. Their emotional investment in their children is so assured that calling it a “task” seems wrong. Parents naturally rejoice and grieve with their children; the real task at times is disengaging. In other roles, however, it can take conscious effort to remember that some of one’s ideas and ways of life have been taken up by others; that one’s gifts (money, help, a listening ear) ripple indefinitely outward.

What also survives us is our work. This kind of survival is more meaningful in some lines of work than in others. Bridges, books, businesses endure; clean carpets, ad campaigns, paperwork do not. Yet even with these there can be a sense that one has contributed to the great flow of interconnected lives and events—which is to say, that our work survives in the lives of others. (The distinction between “the next generations” and “our work” is fairly arbitrary.)

Political work, often draining and frustrating, nevertheless can be immensely powerful. Feminist elders, civil rights workers, LGBT activists, are all retiring in a world radically changed by their efforts. They helped their children and grandchildren personally, but also politically. Those who worked for causes that at least for now seem to be meeting defeat—unions, economic justice—need consciously to cultivate open hope, as I treat it in that chapter.

Finally, what indubitably survives is the earth. A friend pictures the world after her death as a sea of grass, like that which once covered the Great Plains: sunlit, waving in the wind, ageless. That sea of grass is largely gone, and far more damage to the planet is underway. Nevertheless, the physical world will go on, in constantly changing forms. What is being lost is the environment we knew, in which people had learned how to live well. My friend’s identification is partly in the planet, however it may change; but she also works to preserve an environment that will nurture coming generations. For her and her compatriots, open hope is also essential.

Those not yet old have longer personal futures, and need to be seriously engaged with forging them. But at every age we can, and do, reach beyond ourselves. In fact, children, adolescents and young adults can be quite idealistically devoted to the future of others and of the earth. In midlife, burdened with responsibility and bruised by encounters with reality, that idealism can fade. Both groups can learn from elders who persist in hope in spite of a thorough understanding of personal limits.

This ability to acknowledge limits can in fact be part of one’s legacy. It has become fashionable to talk about and even institutionalize mentoring. A little mentioned facet of it is disclosure of one’s failures. I have been bolstered by hearing of the ways in which my own elders failed -- a comprehensive exam, an oral defense, a painful rejection letter – knowing that in the end they prevailed, learning that failure is a normal part of professional life. I try to do the same for those now younger than me.

**Conclusion**

I call reaching these desirable states of mind – cherishing the present, accepting the past, engaging with the future -- “tasks,” but they are not accomplished by direct choice. Like any virtue they are cultivated rather than simply chosen. But also like other virtues, choices about what to do are steps toward their acquisition. Letting go, for instance, is in part giving *things* away, making physical space and freeing up time. Identifying with a future beyond one’s own involves giving time and energy to those younger, to one’s work and to the natural world. Cherishing the present requires consciously setting aside goals and regrets in order just to “be here now.” This is a choice, and in a sense an action, but largely an inner one. Similarly, accepting one’s flawed and darker self comes from a willingness to see, as memories float up and one chooses (more or less consciously) to look at them. These virtues are acquired in part from example; hence my repeated claim that everyone would benefit if elderhood were more valued.

The three tasks identified here arise in every stage of life, in various shapes. Everyone faces loss, because life is change and change entails loss; often it creates space for something new. Most people compose and revise the stories of their pasts. Everyone needs to invest in a future larger than their own. If elderhood came to be appreciated—really appreciated, not just given lip service—the young and middle-aged could learn from the example of elders who understand the tasks more centrally, develop skills for undertaking them, and provide exemplars. Again, if elderhood were to become a time of safety and a place of honor, those younger might be freed of the fear of aging that now distorts our culture (and particularly damages women). Could the day come when old age would be viewed not with fear but with contented anticipation? This is fiercely hard to imagine, but conceivable.

I began this essay noting, as so many have, that old age—elderhood—has become for us a season without meaning: without ideals, rights, and obligations. Ronald Nakasone describes a different culture, from which we could learn:

Japanese Buddhists revere in elders the spiritual quality of "Kyogai," . . . a fullness of life that comes from living in a transient and interdependent world. The task for elders is to integrate the countless causes and conditions of the past and present that impacted their lives and to discover new dimensions for spiritual explorations in the circumstances they find themselves. The presence of ease and equanimity characterizes . . . kyogai. Elders have a responsibility to cultivate ]it] and be mentors for the young.[[41]](#endnote-41)

Cultural location is a matter not just of attitude but of practical arrangements. My purpose has been to name some of the fruits of success, and leave for others to name the practical steps needed to achieve them. But I will close with an idea, or perhaps a metaphorical fantasy, put forward by Joan Erikson: that each city have large central parks, and within them retirement centers. Her image expresses the hope that one day we will celebrate elderhood as an integral part of a full human life.

Ruth: Don’t jettison wisdom; what I’m describing really is.

Likes: relational

**Cherishing the present**: parenthood; add flow, foreground flow, Cziksentmiyaly

Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries,* care for the elderly sometimes is best from paid strangers

Perhaps note, in the justice avoidance, the price to kids, to Head Start. Selfishness among the elderly.

Sense of place, attn. is growing, comes from gardening and agricultural

Practical wisdom, not theoretical wisdom

Learning to forgive yourself

Investing in the world; maybe connect more explicitly with “living a meaningful life” -- the future becomes a natural outgrowth of

**Conclusion** punch up the connection with the nature

1. Cole & Winkler, p. 3; Fahey and Holstein p. 241. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Hall, New Yorker [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Amanda S. Barusch, book requested from MSU Lib 11/25/13 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Nakasone [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Thomas, p. 292. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Staudinger 1999, 2001; Jonson and Magnusson. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Vacek; Freedman p. 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See for instance McKerlie. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Marshall 2006, ix,. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Calasanti et al. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Calasanti, 15, 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The book we know as *The Coming of* Age has a more forthright title in French: *La Vieillesse*, or “old age.” [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Lindeman; Thomas 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Thomas, *What Are Old People For?* 15-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. William Thomas, *What are Old People For?*, p. 15 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Hall, New Yorker [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: The Experience of Play in Work and Games.* Also *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life.* [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Martin Grotjahn, “The Day I Got Old,” quoted in Winkler and Cole [ENL] p 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Life Cycle Completed, p. 127. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Claudel, *Journal*, cited in Beauvoir, p. 303. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. For an interesting history of the way public programs have impacted private (often commercial) initiatives, see this from FATE (Foundation Aiding the Elderly) <http://www.4fate.org/history.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Mikkelson [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. *.* Contemporary discussion of the latter parallels the discussion within Western philosophical ethics about partiality and impartiality. Sarkissian; [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Bodenheimer and Grumbach, get pages; 75% of care for dependent elders is done by families. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Staudinger 2001, 151-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. I use “the Eriksons” rather than “Erik H. Erikson,” assuming that Joan’s collaboration was lifelong. This is strongly suggested in her “Preface to the Extended Version” of their ­The Life Cycle Completed. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Staudinger, 2001: 152. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. MacIntyre, *After* Virtue. For the French structuralists see for instance “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” in the *Encyclopedia of Semiotics.* [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Schachtman; Lamarque; Christman; Rudd [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Velleman, Strawson [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Schechtman 162. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. For Velleman sequential memories become a narrative with explanatory power when they fit into an affect program, a sequence of emotions which end in resolution. Velleman pp.13-15. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Rudd, Taylor (not in ENL), MacIntyre [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. McAdams 2001, p. 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Strawson 433. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Strawson 437-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Strawson find location: embarrassment, and death [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Schechtman 177. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Schechtman 176. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Staudinger 2001, 156. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Nakasone, abstract [↑](#endnote-ref-41)