

Editorial

Looking Backward While Gazing Ahead: An Historian of Aging Reflects on Time's Borders

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Abstract: Looking backward for a usable past has long been an instructive way to gaze into the vagaries of an uncertain future. I learned the merits of this approach training to be an historian. And as an historian interested in gerontology, I grew to appreciate the value of studying continuities and changes in human development set into motion before late life. This essay begins in the present with my imminent retirement. It then looks retrospectively at my academic career with the hope that emerging scholars can profit from the journey.

Keywords: past; present context; future uncertainties; individual development

1. Introduction

Weeks after my seventieth birthday, I want to imagine future aging by looking backward. There is little risk in offering frank recollections, professional successes and honest insights about career mistakes and mishaps. I hope that the candor will be instructive to young scholars, although I recognize that futures do not come prepackaged. I retrace my retirement process because I once pitied and ignored those drooping older scholars in the back bench of the departmental meeting room. It is hard to fathom that they once looked like you (and less so me), vital academics who published papers and voted on tenure decisions. Theirs appears to be a cautionary tale, although surely there is more to be told. Does their passivity foreshadow our future selves? Does it summon me to my proximate station of aging? Even short-term contingencies along time's mutable borders can prove as inscrutable as long-term final acts.

2. The New Retirement Presents Many Academic Roles and Robes

Retirement transitions have changed markedly over the past fifty years. My father's generation was expected to die before they collected Social Security benefits. Instead, those World War II veterans got monthly checks worth more than they contributed as workers. Social Security eased financial burdens, enough (along with private pensions and savings) to permit middle- and working-class beneficiaries to pursue leisure-time activities.

Baby Boomers like me perceive retirement finances differently from our parents. Some wizened Dr. Spock has our backs, we trust, so all will turn out fine. Hewing to an unfounded projection about future well-being, many Baby Boomers in mid-life ignored warnings that we were saving too little for rainy days. The recession of 2008 cost Baby Boomers money and peace of mind. The unexpected downturn gutted early-retirement schedules. In addition, experts predicted that we were becoming more obese and less wealthy than our parents. Unwanted, disconcerting prospects jarred complacencies as Boomers entered late careers.

Grasping for analogies to give form to ill-defined options, I fashioned clichés about aging's next steps, which paralleled tenure candidates' prospects for success. If financial advisors could assure me that there was a 98% chance that I had accumulated enough wealth to last for a quarter-century,

why should I not entertain the delusion that academics with portfolios so promising at age 33 would not be addicts at 38, bedridden at 45, or dead at 57?

Amidst future uncertainties, Baby Boomers (including me) try to conceal narcissism inside a mask of decorum, sometimes inventing counterfactual evidence and alternative truths as the emeritus designation becomes the new routine. Sometimes the tact works. I skip faculty meetings; I have fewer manuscripts to review. I gleefully exit center stage, now to sit in the wings with scholarly resisters and outlaws. There I shout lines bound to disappoint gerontology's revisionists and conformists.

One example suffices. In graduate school, I learned that disengagement theory, formulated in the 1960s and heralded as an original contribution to aging theory, quickly became a discredited, discarded construct. According to "disengagement theory," aging individuals increasingly and inexorably withdrew from interests and projects that had preoccupied them in middle age. In place of disengagement theory, gerontologists substituted "activity theory," which posited that many senior citizens preferred fresh adventures, pursued second careers, and forged new friendships in order to sustain prime-time vitality.

Now I have second thoughts about scrapping disengagement theory. Surely withdrawal is not an inevitable, universal phenomenon. But if I intend in the future to celebrate diversity and to promote variegated options for growth in advanced maturity, I should don the robes of an outlier. Marginality undercuts my *modus operandi* since it invites opprobrium. No longer willing to spread gossip or accept social invitations, I do what I wish, relishing that the unfolding of my future aging into the here and now will culminate into an authentic completion of being. Perhaps this script existed all along, but I was too self-absorbed to comprehend its significance. Rather than day-dreaming on those back benches; were my senior colleagues castigating themselves for doing too much, or too little with their gifts? Their retrospective musings are not mine. I worry about how to acclimate to retirement with an action plan that addresses life's uncertainties and ambiguities.

Disinclined to Fate's dictates, I decided to move to the Institute for Spirituality and Health (ISH) in the heart of the Texas Medical Center. Few there know that I once had been a professor and dean at the University of Houston. Liminality can clothe us in anonymity while we assume new identities. I have slowed down, but I seem as busy as I was thirty years ago—when I served as deputy director of the Institute of Gerontology at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor), lecturing four hundred students in my History survey, and helping to raise two daughters. Re-potting at career's end for me has been a privilege bestowed, not earned. Disengaging into this type of retirement serendipitously laid the foundation for a state of renewal, not rejuvenation. Old dogs can learn some new tricks—if they are willing and capable.

3. The Ripening of a Baby Boomer

As a child, I benefited from Pax Americana abroad and prosperity at home. The years between 1946 and 1964 did not lift all parents from the deprivations of the Great Depression or recurring horrors associated with global annihilation during World War II. Yet intellectuals, politicians and homeowners celebrated abundance fed by affluence. Current events did not shatter confidence in the American dream overnight, but they uprooted complacency about the inevitability of progress and prosperity. Martin Luther King's 1963 speech in Washington underscored blatant racial divides perpetuating injustices and inequalities north and south. John F. Kennedy's murder a few months later presaged a culture of violence among citizens accustomed to putting faith in reason and laws.

Boomers coming of age in the tumultuous 60s reacted differently to the unforeseen. Some took shelter in old-time religion. Others took drugs as they awaited the return to normalcy. Still others invented ways to adapt to the unfolding drama. The underside of postwar America pierced jejune complacency, but it did open reticent fathers to discussing how they struggled to escape hard time to make things better for his sons. My college years revealed how social dislocations of the 1960s coincided with intellectual disarticulation. The nation's vital center could not hold. Most of my

classmates, virtually all the faculty, and a surprising number of alumni supported marches for justice in the American South and protested the war in Vietnam.

The 1960s ferment on campus and events during the short-lived 'Great Society' period of liberalism dissuaded me from preparing to become a doctor or lawyer. Instead, I decided to write history, not make it. The search for a rich, usable past provided an optimal way for me and my cohort to enter the thicket their future selves. (My parents strongly disagreed, although they never explained why. Their eldest son aspiring to become a school teacher was not in the game plan.) I moved on, intoxicated by the power of nuanced and complex ideas grounded in the contingencies and choices of modern life. "The times were a changing," Bob Dylan declared. I understood that Baby Boomers were inheriting a future over which they had little control. I doubted that the values of my childhood could be retrofitted to advance liberal visions of a Great Society.

Several years I was stationed on an army base near Oklahoma City where an indulgent drill sergeant let me watch *The CBS Evening News*, then anchored by Walter Cronkite. One night, I watched President Richard Nixon promise delegates of a White House Conference on Aging a generous commitment of Federal resources to reduce several economic and medical problems ascribed to growing older. With the exceptions of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, and Dwight David Eisenhower, twentieth-century American presidents had paid lip service to lifting citizens out of old-age poverty, or putting sick elders in the vanguard of a campaign to institute national health insurance.

While listening to *CBS Evening News* I was reading John Demos' *A Little Commonwealth* [1]. Demos had many insights into childhood and youth, but the chapters on middle age and late life were short and thin. Nixon, Cronkite, and Demos, I quickly recognized, were identifying an age-based dimension absent from the nation's civil-rights movements. Most Americans celebrated the cult of youth in the United States. Investigators in the 1950s and 1960s had mapped out racial and ethnic disparities in addition to structural anomalies, economic and otherwise. Unfortunately, few commentators addressed older people's vicissitudes.

I convinced myself that delineating past and present continuities and changes in the dynamics of age and aging might justify the expansion of indispensable supports and resources for those currently old in America. Conjoining past and present served as a springboard for future aging: looking ahead to the advanced maturity desired by me and my generation could permit more options and opportunities than available to our grandparents. And lest this sound Pollyannaish, I imagined being a historian of aging who tracked future possibilities, a tempting niche. Bolder yet, I might speak in Congress and on networks. Not many past masters identified as applied historians, women and men who interpreted the present and future, as scholars and activists. I had role models—Richard Hofstadter, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Henry Steele Commager, and James MacGregor Burns. I lacked their gifts, but the history of aging had few path finders, which gave me ample room to work at the intersection of history and gerontology.

4. Graduate School as an Incubator of Change

Defining my career trajectory as an historian with a growing interest in writing narratives of older people complemented two sea changes in U.S. higher education in the 1970s. First, in terms of recruiting women and men for the professoriate, the nation's leading centers emphasized candidates' likelihood for demonstrable success and paid somewhat less attention to their pedigree—genealogical and educational. Second, academic barons entertained research on gender, race, class, religion and region, which went beyond foci on the struggles and achievements of dead white men. So, there were curricular changes when I entered graduate school. Many of us studied under advocates of the so-called new social history, or with traditionalists bending to the times. Their radical critiques offended scholars who wanted universities to remain enclaves of reason and comity.

Yet change of this magnitude occurred neither swiftly nor in a linear fashion. The generation of academics teaching in the 1940s and 1950s laid the spadework for innovations in the 1960s and 1970s.

With few funds and building budgets teachers had to accommodate waves of high-school graduates seeking college degrees. And institutions of higher learning could not seem impervious to questions of justice and equality, which were transforming the media and political system. I grasped the big picture well enough to know that it did not apply to me.

Few of my advisors and potential mentors expressed enthusiasm for my idea of charging into old-age history. My father, not given to profanity, made his displeasure painfully apparent over drinks. Teams of Ivy-League historians wondered, along with my father, how on earth an unlettered and unsophisticated youth like me could capture the thoughts and feelings of older aged groups past or present. My wife gave me four years to try out my ideas before, she insisted, that I get certified as an insurance agent. At the last moment, a distinguished intellectual historian, John Higham, invited me to study with him at the University of Michigan, which boasted the largest gerontology library in the U.S.

In four years (the best in my career), I finished a 731-page dissertation, in which I traced parallels and vectors in social and cultural patterns of the meanings and experiences of late life between 1790 and 1970. Of course, I had terrific support. Michigan was a haven for the new social history. Wilbur Cohen, Lyndon Johnson's secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, coached me in New-Deal renditions of old-age welfare politics. Peter Stearns accepted a paper I wrote for Professor Higham in his *Journal of Social History*. David Van Tassel invited me to attend a conference on the humanities and the elderly at Case Western University. There I met Erik and Joan Erikson, Peter Laslett, and Leon Edel. David Hackett Fischer, who also was at Van Tassel's conference, unhinged me by announcing that he was completing a history of old age. Having read *Historians' Fallacies* [2] which sullied the reputations of his elders, I feared that Fischer would lay me low in *Growing Old in America* [3]. It never occurred to me at the time why Fischer would not waste time on an untested rookie

There were heady moments in the transition: I was quite flattered at my first attendance at a conference of the American Historical Association that esteemed presses and prestigious schools to an interest in my work and in me. I survived Professor Fischer's barbs with few scrapes. I lectured and held seminars on other campuses. With support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, I helped to assemble a Smithsonian Institution traveling exhibit on "Images of Old Age." The pictorial display, which was based on my thesis, travelled the country for five years. Its wide appeal for diverse audiences counts as my most notable contribution.

Hard work and a few solid ideas paid off, but propitious timing bolstered chances for success in writing and teaching, although they rarely last forever. I benefitted from the Age Wave of the 1970s, which sustained policy advances and public interest in the promises and challenges of being old in America. Public interest was heightened by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* [4], May Sarton's *As We Are Now* [5] and Robert Butler's *Why Survive?* [6]. "Spiritual aging" was a major plank of the 1971 White House Conference on Aging. Opportunities in gerontology abounded.

5. Books Measure Historians' Progress

I enjoyed enthusiastic reactions to my first book, *Old Age in the New Land* [7], weighing in at a svelte 237 pages. *Choice* named it an outstanding academic book. Dr. Butler, by then founding director of the National Institute of Aging, wrote a pithy foreword. Reviewers across disciplines appreciated the contents. Today, a less than flattering backstory must be told. Historians were the main audience; the book's merits and deficiencies were to be judged in the eyes of a promotion committee who would either secure me tenure or send me peddling insurance policies. I had done my homework, which I presented cautiously. Ever the Mugwump (the focus of my college honors essay were the reformist fence-sitters who helped James A. Garfield get elected president in 1880), I integrated the new social history with the new cultural history presented in the most pellucid prose possible. I recommend similar prudence in presenting a first book for review. Some scholars have dissented from my interpretation, but no one has trashed its contents.

In 1980, at the invitation of Jon Hendricks, a sociologist and gerontological theorist launching a new series on aging for Little, Brown, I plunged into my second book project, *Shades of Gray* [8] and delved into twentieth-century materials (mainly normative values girding Federal policies poorly explored in my dissertation) [9]. I aimed this second book to gerontologists and students in aging-related graduate courses. Teachers and practitioners in the field told me that my treatment was instructive. A second round of praise followed, but unfortunately it did not allay the insecurities of a neophyte in the policy arena. Playing to strengths in cultural history I framed *Shades of Gray* around normative dualisms in order to link cultural values and policy keywords. The book sold more copies than anything I ever wrote, but one scholar's rebuke is what I mainly remember. William Graebner, an able scholar whose latest book, *A History of Retirement* [10], I had praised in a leading historical journal, dismissed my argument as "liberal shibboleth." I was stunned by the rebuke, which undoubtedly, I took far too personally. That the criticism appeared in print a few weeks before my tenure review was not comforting: two members of the committee helpfully wanted to make sure that I knew of its existence.

Shades of Gray demonstrated how risky it could be to work at disciplinary crossroads—even ones seemingly unrelated as history and gerontology. Varied are theoretical constructs, which are advanced and protected by gatekeepers in each and every academic sub-field as well as the aging enterprise. To protect myself in the future, I decided to align with gerontologists rather than historians, a move covered with false illusions. I was a tenured historian. No age-based Ph.D. existed in 1976, when I earned my terminal degree, and there were only three programs in the mid-1980s. Peers at this point identified me as a prolific researcher on aging who mined historical treasure troves—no more, no less. Move on.

My third book, *Social Security: Visions and Revisions* [11], demonstrates what happens when the borders of time do not support good ideas. The project began quite auspiciously; it did not end as I hoped. The Twentieth Century Fund, which during the 1930s had published several important studies of social insurance and attacks of the Townsend movement during the period, accepted my proposal to write a fiftieth anniversary retrospective for Social Security. At about the same time as I was applying for support, the Reagan White House was appealing to the Democratic leadership in Congress to alleviate the program's fiscal crisis: Social Security could not pay its bills in a few months. Roughly a year later, the joint commission appointed by the president and the Speaker of the House negotiated a set of compromises that ultimately became the basis for the 1983 Social Security amendments.

The Fund in light of developments in Washington renegotiated my contract. The director wanted me to put the 1983 Social Security amendments into historical perspective. I agreed, because it complemented the Applied History program at Carnegie Mellon, where I then worked with Peter Stearns, and it enabled me to go to Washington to speak to commissioners and their staff. I finished the first draft so that the book would appear on its original schedule.

It was not to be. The director of the Twentieth Century Fund loathed the first draft of my manuscript; he found it (rightly) sympathetic to liberal interpretations. (Elder liberals on the Commission disliked the manuscript). I was assigned an editor to redirect the thesis, and the Fund commissioned a Stanford economist who advised Ronald Reagan, to write a conservative critique of Social Security, present and future.

The lesson was clear: historians writing about twentieth-century developments concerning the emergence of the gray lobby and an old-age political economy, must take cognizance of ideological shifts in the American landscape. We do not have to share Henry Ford's presumption that history is bunk to acknowledge that its value in the marketplace of ideas is tarnished. Great historians pontificate; lesser mortals supply sound bytes.

I think that my fourth book is the most insightful, provocative project I ever wrote, *Crossing Frontiers* [12] traced the history of the gerontological imagination down to 1995. It was ten years in the making. I benefited from intellectual volleys at the University of Michigan. And ever

the traditionalist, I aimed to mark the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Gerontological Society of America. Fearing that the celebration would go unnoticed, I embarked simultaneously on two other projects. Doctoral student Daniel Albert and I compiled a biographical dictionary of several hundred researchers, educators, and activists in aging [13]. It remains the most complete archive of its kind. In addition, two well-known gerontologists—Steven Wieland and Carole Haber—joined me in publishing keywords in aging, which included the historical derivation of the phrases and terms used by researchers on aging [14]. I anticipated that the works would be roundly heralded and appropriate paeans to my stewardship. Instead, the trilogy was briefly noted in *The Gerontologist* in the late 1990s by an historian who clearly did not think much of the trilogy. I was livid. Authors cannot pick reviewers, but surely the book editor might have picked a less obnoxious candidate. Or was this a sign that I, along with my discipline, did not matter in gerontological circles as much as I thought?

I suspected that gerontology was losing strength at the very time it should have been bursting with energy. Aging stories were in the news, though anti-aging remedies and placebos attracted more attention. Negative images of senescence pervaded popular culture. Naturally, there were fears about Alzheimer's, a scourge for which there is no cure. Writers dealt with women in the sandwich generation who juggled child care and elder care. Civic leaders moved beyond recurring social-security crises to identify pension woes in municipalities and states as well as in corporate plans. The media—particularly AARP's *Modern Maturity* and *Readers' Digest*—circulated positive approaches to late life which offered elevating messages not found in sentimental or ageist renditions. And judicious multi-disciplinary treatments of *Successful Aging* issued by distinguished gerontologists were discussed in popular and professional settings.

The metrics were not reassuring. Memberships in the Gerontological Society of America and the American Society on Aging had plateaued. AARP's membership fluctuated depending on how grassroots members reacted to policy initiatives in the central office. Job openings in the aging field are another indicator. Many positions, listed as custodial, went unfilled or experienced rapid turnover. New funding mechanisms and specialized interests were supplanting occasions to bring together experts from different fields. Sociology, psychology, anthropology and other robust disciplines were forming cells and networks of aging researchers within their borders. Gerontology was not the only integrative area suffering; the shrinking of multi-disciplinarity was manifest in urban studies, and academic hybrids focusing on technologies. If they had a critical mass of supporters and access to funds, African-American centers and women's studies became departments. I noted these developments, but I knew I lacked the patience to bemoan, much less fix, the problems. Had I not finally reached the stage to pursue my own agenda?

My fifth book, *Older Americans, Vital Communities* [15], took seriously the need for robust theory-building in gerontology. Researchers in aging had commented that gerontology was data-rich and theory-poor. Some claimed that the paucity of heuristic constructs was a cause for a decline of interest in the field. I wished to take a systematic look at an idea that both appealed and eluded me for decades: to advance gerontology, I believed that it was crucial to distinguish individual developmental growth through later years from societal aging, which focused on the structural and cultural lags in institutions. Once again, my broad view of aging's future did not jibe with my persona. Historians are not known for interest and success in theory-building. Nor was much attention paid at the 60th anniversary of the Gerontological Society of America, a time in which contemporary American bio-medical investigators, psycho-social researchers, experts in the humanities and policy analysts, as well as older women and men were focusing on resilience, genomes, and accumulation theory.

So too was the reception of my last book, a biography of *Robert N. Butler, M.D.: Visionary of Health Aging* [16], filled me with pride and disillusionment. Dr. Butler exemplified roles of intellectual broker, bold health-science educator, and suave advocate. There is no such person like him in geriatrics and gerontology today. Dr. Butler was a pioneer ahead of his time, comparable to Booker T. Washington and to the suffragettes demanding the vote in the 1920s. My target audience in this instance was narrow; I appealed to geriatricians and gerontologists over forty—experts who had respected or despised

Dr. Butler's legacy. Vern Bengtson [17] praised the Butler book in a lengthy review in *The Gerontologist*, but intellectual biographies must do better in other fields than gerontology. I find this surprising, given the field's interest in wisdom; gerontologists might invest in transmitting elders' wisdom to rising generations. For the moment, the only other book-length biography in gerontology is devoted to Maggie Kuhn [18], who launched the Gray Panthers. Rising scholars agree that the search for a usable past can spark the aging imagination. Hyung Wook Park's *Old Age, New Science* [19] provides a template for displaying such work by a new generation of old-age historians.

6. What Does It Mean? Four Take-Away Lessons—From the Author, Not the Text:

1. The future of aging is rich in possibilities non-existent when I was younger. Today's emerging professionals in gerontology are riding different crests of Age Wave than I enjoyed and fretted about in the 1970s and 1980s. In retirement, I mentor younger professors and students, some of whom thousands of miles from Houston. And big issues persist. Poor minority women suffer under triple jeopardy. And I will I speak out against ageism, I often encounter it.
2. Temporal and cultural uncertainties complicate retrofitting to late life. Real life has a funny way of intruding. I enjoy the freedom from earlier responsibilities. I enjoy the independence afforded from working at my own pace, on my own time. I delight in how much happiness can be found outside the cloistered ivy. In the three years since I remarried, however, my bride and I have endured and survived serious health crises. Our time together will probably be briefer, in all likelihood, than we imagined when we exchanged wedding vows. We are grateful for what we have. We laugh and talk a lot, but we get serious about what it all means, too.
3. Everyone dies, although we do not like to talk about it. In *The Nature of Man* [20] Nobel-Laureate Elie Metchnikoff posited a connection between gerontology and thanatology that few researchers on aging choose to investigate. Facing finitude is critical to the completion of being. For those not keen with wrestling with angels, it helps to muster patience and resilience. Aging's future requires us to live into dying. This means letting go of things that did not matter, even though we know that this simple truth seems at odds with our sense that the diversity of aging never fades:
4. Once we face the future of aging and finitude, other dimensions of life prevail. Long ago, I decided not to frame what remains in terms of positive aging, vital aging, successful aging, and conscious aging—the phrases are so cerebral, so upbeat, so positive. And I still ponder a lot about how age and aging affect race, gender, and class.

Advancing in years yet unwilling to disengage on someone else's schedule, I now gird myself to delve into issues that make aging's future exciting and challenging. I have in mind love, intimacy, vulnerability, and fragility, keywords that cluster around renewal, suffering, and integrity. There is not enough Botox or Viagra to sustain youthful old age. But intimacy, sexual and emotional, takes on new form. Renewal in late life is possible and desirable. Inhabiting the land of the aged, what May Sarton depicted as "a foreign country with an unknown language" [5] (p. 17), scares most befuddled pilgrims binds. But the transition to aging's future comes easier if the process partakes of a spirit of empathy and respect, enough to dampen fears and regrets over disappointments and failures in the past.

Great narratives of human development at any stage, like historical chronicles and epics, do not hide the warts, do not mask tragedy. The rhythms of time matter, for its waves crest and fall seemingly at will. Borders that can alter the course of our aging futures, shift with the tides. Yesterday's imperfection and loss bear witness to hopes shadowing despairs, lights flickering through darkness, and fractured, stoic disengagements wrestling over fear, real and unconscious. But love with its options and possibilities remains in the here and now.

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