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Edward F. Ansello

Virginia Commonwealth University, eansello@vcu.edu

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From the Director, Virginia Center on Aging

By Edward F. Ansello, Ph.D.

On wisdom, gerontology, and personal aging: Through a looking glass

A recent, highly readable essay by Arthur Krystal in the *New Yorker* questions what gifts aging brings. He notes that the proposition that later life offers unprecedented opportunity for self-discovery, insight, and wisdom has been growing slowly but incrementally, like the older population itself, since the 1970s. It's time, he says, to question its accuracy and the degree to which we are taking advantage.

I agree, and ask if how and what we teach about aging helps us to achieve these gifts.

Aging demographics themselves are fraught with controversy. For some, like economist Robert Samuelson and columnist George Will, this increase in numbers of older adults is like a tsunami, destructive and presaging economic ruin through age-related entitlement programs that produce intergenerational inequities and an unsustainable economy. For others, like the late Ram Dass and gerontologist Lars Tors-tam, the trend could be likened to a gentler age wave, offering increasing numbers of individuals in late life opportunities for greater self-awareness, spiritual growth, and evaluation of their place in the world through self-transcendence. Wisdom, considered to reflect unbiased judgement, self-knowledge, compassion and understanding, could flow from this trend.

Ageism quickly comes to the fore in discussions on either side: alarms that an ageist preferential treatment of older adults through social insurance entitlements disenfranchises those younger from a stable future versus claims that societal ageism minimizes later life's potential and inhibits contributions to individual self-realization, wisdom, and community good.

What follows is my personal perspective, with no more authority or gravitas than one person's reflections after a career in gerontology.

In English, the principal meaning of "looking glass" is a mirror; it can also mean "counter to common sense or expectations." I hope that my comments

about being an older gerontologist and about the dominant focus of gerontology serve both of these definitions.

Individuation is the name of the game in later life. Life stamps each of us in idiosyncratic ways, from where and how we are born to where and how we pass our days. We each interpret events and people through the lenses of our own previous experiences to create unique perspectives, aptitudes, values, strengths and weaknesses. We grow less like our age-mates in most every way from dexterity to abstract reasoning, from organ functioning to vocabulary. We acquire and lose at our own rate experiences of learning, intimacy, ability, and understanding. I've called this individuating phenomenon the geriatric imperative (Janicki & Ansello, 2000).

From my perspective, so much of the thrust in the field of gerontology is to achieve a "nomothetic" understanding of the processes of aging; that is, to acquire data and descriptive statistics that help to create a generalizable template of the processes of aging. We measure, compare, and publish averages and ranges of scores, be they on problem solving tasks or on numbers of daily interactions with other people in a neighborhood. These normative findings help guide public policy deliberations, public health initiatives, product development decisions, and capture general principles about aging and older adults, a broad but fairly shallow rendering.

Understanding the individual, one's interiority, what a person thinks or feels about matters including one's own aging, can be enormously difficult and requires an "idiographic" approach that does not lend itself to large scale projects and does not, of course, produce generalizable findings. This idiographic, individual approach, seen today in what's called narrative gerontology (de Madeiros, 2013), produces a deeper understanding of the aging person but a narrowed understanding of aging. Inasmuch as generalizability is the grease that lubricates funding support from enterprises like the government, businesses, and

foundations, idiographic studies have limited, almost curated generalizability.

There are terms to describe these different analyses and their different results. In Jungian psychology, persona is the outer garment of who we are. Soul is the inner self. We develop a persona in the course of our growing older. Our environment, social position, birth order, education, friends, work experiences, gender, and other lived conditions help shape and encourage us to adopt a persona or outward manifestation of who we are: parent, nurse, travel agent, teacher, whatever. For some of us, what we do becomes who we are. We may wear this persona for decades without asking ourselves: Is this who I really am? And this is perfectly fine. The persona is protective; it offers security and self-identity. So it's easy for later life to become Mid-Life, Part Two.

Understanding one's true self, one's soul, is not undertaken lightly and rarely is completed in a lifetime. Most of us don't even think to begin, while some take small steps and are content. This simply reflects the basic fundament of growing older: individuation.

Soul-searching has been well described in Rick Moody and David Carroll's *Five Stages of the Soul* (1997). The stages begin with hearing an internal "Call" to discern our purpose. Many of us don't have this progenitor experience. Disengagement may be central to attaining self-insight and wisdom but our society prizes engagement, activity, and productivity. Torstam noted this early on in an issue of *Generations* (1999-2000) when he described the challenges to his theory of self-transcendence in later life.

Self-appraisal was an integral part of the pre-retirement seminars that I gave for about 25 years for the FBI, IBM, NIH, and other acronyms. I was part of comprehensive, separate four-day programs with both the FBI and the International Broadcasting Bureau at the Department of State where I emphasized reflection while other presenters discussed second careers, finances, and the like. Some pre-retirees related to the message, many did not. This is as to be expected with the process of individuation. Plus, the omnipresence of social media and other intrusions in daily life (emails, assignments, etc.) mitigate against introspection or metacognition, which is the aware-

ness of one's own knowledge, what one does and doesn't know.

There are various models for later life, including Successful Aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1988), Productive Aging (Butler & Gleason, 1985), Creative Aging (Cohen, 2001) and various taxonomies of developmental tasks, from Havighurst to Erickson. While each has dimensions that are external (e.g., public attitudes) and internal (e.g., personal development), each also has its strengths and weaknesses and its adherents. Not surprisingly, given the primacy of individuation, each may be germane and helpful for some individuals and not others.

Dealing with losses and forces over which one has no control. To some degree, I think this is emblematic of later life. When younger, one has the illusion, at least, of being able to overcome or confront these forces. In my case, the forces include a recent change of higher administration that fixed what wasn't broken and diminished my roles and responsibilities within the university; happening at the end of my career, it inserted an unfortunate note to my persona but I see it as typical of so many later lives. Times, values, and worth are transitory and what endures must be an honest self-appraisal rather than the opinions of others.

Conscious aging and gerotranscendence, as well as some elements of Cumming & Henry's disengagement theory (withdrawal and reflection, awareness of finitude, and making room for those younger), have more relevance to me now, even though I have advocated these models for more than 40 years in my humanities-related gerontological work.

My daily routine upon awaking is something different from what it was 20 years ago and quite frankly something I could not have anticipated then. First thing each morning, I appraise the levels of pain in my back, my feet, my knees, and whatever loss might be causing psychological pain. One thing that older gerontologists do is older gerontologists die. As we grow older, the deaths of friends and colleagues seem a too frequent routine. Again, something unknown to me 20 years ago. But, as with a screen-saver, one moves beyond this appraisal to open up apps or platforms of one's life and the screen-saver "disappears"

into the background, present but not primary. Another piece of self-awareness. As stated in Ecclesiastes, “In much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow. . . .”

I don’t think that we gerontologists overall do an adequate job of teaching about interiority and self-reflection. We overly subscribe to models that advocate the worth of older adults as a group (e.g., productive aging) and we rely upon the more readily accessible and generalizable descriptive statistical approach to research and teaching, one that, in turn, helps to produce the numbers of scholarly publications necessary for promotion within higher education. Relatedly, our curricula still tend to rely upon the triumvirate of the social aspects of aging, bio-physical aspects of aging, and psychological aspects of aging, with scant attention to how the humanities and the arts (literature, music, poetry, philosophy, etc.) can contribute to interiority and a

sensitivity to what it *means* to grow old.

Critical gerontology maintains that there is no objective meaning to growing old. As Ronald Blythe noted four decades ago in *The View in Winter* after collecting oral histories of older adults, old age is full of life and full of death, full of promise and full of disaster, full of individual lives lived in their own different ways.

Late life offers us an opportunity, nothing more. Whether we undertake self-appraisal and grow in wisdom is an option during the added years of our lives. How widespread are these options being exercised? Has the election of older national candidates produced leaders with wisdom?

On the other hand, can a broader, humanities-infused gerontology help develop broader self-awareness and incipient wisdom?