

Chapter 7

You Don't Grow Old on Your Own

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Although there is plenty of space
on a gravestone to contain, bound in moss,
the abridged version of a man's life,
detail is always welcome.
(Vladimir Nabokov)

Age is a metamorphosis (particularly physical). A competition (in infirmities, illness and length of life). The bill you pay for your life. A liberation. A job you have to do. A confused script. Involuntary house arrest. A challenge. A punishment (at least), a disaster (at worst).

People often use metaphors about age to make pithy comments about the process of aging. It is important to listen to these metaphors, and to what older people themselves say, when thinking about age, ethics, and policy. It's one thing to look at what happens when we get older (or at how we cope with the process); the actual experience is something else again:

Young people have no idea what old age is. I didn't when I was younger. You have to see for yourself what growing old means. There is no training to prepare you. And there's no avoiding it either.

That is why this chapter looks at how older people themselves see their aging process, and why there is plenty of room for their comments.

How do older people experience the reality of aging and being old, something that happens to them regardless of their own wishes, and often catches them unprepared? How do they see individuality, autonomy, relationships and the passing of the years? What do they think gives meaning to the specifics of their existence? What doesn't? This chapter provides impressions of aging on the basis of interviews with fifteen

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older people: Eleven women and four men, all born between 1925 and 1940. The group included two couples. During the rounds of interviews, a distinction was made between two groups: Older people living on their own (including those living in sheltered housing) and residents of nursing or residential homes. Educational backgrounds varied: From a manual worker to university education; and employment histories also varied: From charlady or housewife, through to journalist and teacher. The considerable variety was not restricted to background and employment history. The way individual people thought about old age proved to be very heterogeneous, with contrasts between statements like *'I think it's wonderful to not do anything'* and *'Everything is always "finished". It drives me mad!'*. The numerous metaphors about aging from the first-hand accounts also revealed the internal conflicts between the positive and negative aspects of aging. Below the surface, there is a tension between liberation (the relief from burdens and obligations), humility (putting your own position into perspective, modest gratitude) and humiliation (loss of freedom and identity).

7.1 Dynamic Life Stories

'Life stories' take on many shapes: From relatively limited forms (contact ads, curriculum vitae and tombstones) to specific versions (medical histories, for example) and genuine, fully fledged autobiographies. Life stories are individual repositories of identity and life meaning. The way the story is told changes continuously depending on the time, the aim, the audience and the perspective. Life stories are dynamic entities, full of colour and then draining of colour, like gobstoppers.

The multitude of metaphors and first-hand accounts show that how people perceive aging is an ambiguous process, and that it does not squeeze us into a single, predetermined path. Every older person still has to settle on the conclusion of their own life story. What do older people tell us about their experiences in this respect? Which *faits accomplis*, challenges and decisions do they face?

Throughout the interviews, a clear undertone is that aging is something that happens to you, but that it is certainly not a passive process. On the contrary, aging induces conflicting behaviours: Preservation and adaptation, rebellion and resignation, persistence and farewells. In addition, the people interviewed also described different strategies for making sure that their lives were not hollowed out by the deterioration that comes with age: *Confirmation, integration and continuity*.

7.2 Confirmation

Aging is a job that has to be done. More and more, older people are confronted by a loss of things in life that previously seemed to be so obvious and natural. And as freedom, autonomy and independence become slowly but surely more restricted, physical strength is also affected. There is a slow, reluctant decline. So old age is a suspect venture:

Even so, I'm not sure whether there's anything good about getting old. Of course, I try to make the most of it. Who doesn't? But however you look at it, my time is running out. The emptiness gets emptier, and it gets more and more difficult to fill it up'. [After a hesitant pause:] Aging is a sort of job you have to do, that you can't get out of.

What can older people commit to? How can they avoid the complete erosion of their life? What do they want and/or what can they accept? How do they organise their resistance and/or orient themselves? How can they maintain their presence in a world where their being and functioning is slowly but surely declining? During the interviews, three areas of action emerged: (1) discipline and routine, (2) coping with role reversal and (3) monitoring living space.

7.2.1 Discipline and Routine

How do people actually get older? 'It happens all on its own', said most of the people we interviewed. This does not imply that no effort or adaptation is required. The less you can depend on your own body, the more discipline self-preservation requires:

You do nothing at all, it happens to you whether you want it to or not, you can't avoid it, it's inevitable. You have to accept that you can count on your body less and less; the only thing you can do is to make the most of it.

You need discipline at all times. Especially in the morning. Before, you could ask your body to do anything, now you have to do everything for your body so you can keep using it as long as possible. And it takes more and more time to become yourself every morning. The time when you could just rub a wet flannel over your face is long gone.

Aging means we have to invest to remain ourselves. Rather than achieving what is possible, older people have to preserve what they have, using numerous routines:

Alongside the enjoyment of things around you, you also have to make what there is. For me, routine is important. I live to what may be ingrained habits: From eating fruit at a particular time to clearing up. And the idea of having "all the time in the world" is relative. There's more than enough time to get everything done. Maybe that's the problem. . . that everything is "finished", even the things that don't need to be'. Does that mean unruffled days? 'That's one way of putting it, but I think "monotonous" is a better word. Even though I'm not complaining. At my age, I shouldn't complain.

Routines would seem to be a particularly unwelcome restriction on freedom in nursing and care homes in particular:

Everything here is done to a timetable. In one way, that is pleasant, but I also feel sometimes that I'm being treated like a child.

7.2.2 Role Reversal

Older people also have to confirm and redefine their own rules in social relationships. There are often shifts in social relationships, and certainly between generations. For example, the relationship between children and adults is reversed:

I used to warn the children about crossing the street. Now they do that with me and I think they do it a lot more than I used to: ‘Mum, are you being careful on the stairs?’, ‘Watch out, this floor is slippery’, ‘No, you can’t do that any more, forget about it...’ or ‘You’re starting to go deaf’. These are little things, but even though I’m an old lady I carry on doing the things I used to. I’ve always liked window shopping. I still do, preferably on my own. The children don’t see it like that. They seem to think that somebody in her eighties doesn’t need to be active any longer. At least, not like I am. I don’t find that pleasant. And it’s very restrictive; I sometimes get the feeling that I’m not free any more.

Just like the process of aging itself, changes in the relationships accompanying old age are a source of conflicting emotions. As a rule, concern from others is not felt to be out of place but the dividing line between concern and meddling can sometimes be very thin indeed. When older people stand up to meddling from their children, annoyance is the result:

I even refused to pick up the phone a few times when I saw it was my youngest daughter calling. That just made it worse. She turned up at the front door ten minutes later. . .

A while ago, I arranged to go and see an old friend in Groningen by train. A lovely idea: Two hours sitting quietly in the train. My eldest daughter was meant to be going with me. But she called off at the last minute because she went down with the flu. And what do you think she said? “You shouldn’t go on such a long journey alone. . .” I mean: Perhaps she’s right, but it’s not good. I can still decide for myself what I want to do or not. I don’t always need someone to hold my hand?” [A brief pause, and then with a smile on her thin lips:] ‘Did I go? You bet I did. . .

Nor do residents of nursing and residential homes escape from meddling or patronising, even though they are unhappy about it:

If I don’t feel like play therapy, surely I’m allowed to say: “Not today, thank you!” But I don’t even dare to say that. Because three carers descend on me in no time, trying to convince me how “good for me” it is, and that it gets me “seeing other people”. That’s as may be, but for heaven’s sake, let me decide who I want to sit next to at mealtimes. I do have that privilege, don’t I?

7.2.3 Life Space

Getting older for many people means that they need to make a greater effort to maintain links with the world around them. Even so, people generally think this freedom of movement is very important:

My daughter picks me up on Sundays and we go to the heath for a walk. It’s the high point of the week. I almost feel like a little girl again. I wouldn’t want to miss those trips out for anything.

Even so, and this is something that is highly frustrating for them, a long life means a loss of freedom of movement for many older people:

If you hardly get out any more, just because it is too much effort to get dressed properly, to get the Zimmer, to walk to the lift and walk through the hall to the outside. . . then I feel locked up. It’s compulsory house arrest.

I really felt old a few years ago, when I didn't dare to get on my bike after I'd broken my arm. It's a terrible loss: You suddenly feel cut off from everything outside. You're like a goat tied up with a rope: You can't move outside the circle dictated by the length of the rope. All the cycling I do now is in my dreams. It's lovely, but a big disappointment when I wake up.

In addition to the loss of physical freedom of movement, some older people find it more difficult to be a part of the world around them:

I would like to be a genuine part of this world, and I read the papers every day, so don't get me wrong. And I never miss the news on television. I really do know what's going on in the world. But I sometimes get the feeling that a pair of scissors has come along and cut my links with the world.

7.3 Integration

Old age demands effort. At least, it does if older people want to use confirmation strategies to stem the tide that can wash in with old age, submerging their freedom, autonomy and independence. As an ongoing effort to counteract the crumbling of one's own powers, old age would seem to be an unavoidable Sisyphean challenge. However, the first-hand accounts from older people show that this is not the whole reality. Older people can, for example, feel stronger when they have secure links with the social context, and more particularly in the form of relationships with people and animals.

7.3.1 Relationships

As the world gets smaller with increasing age, the social network generally shrinks as well. Children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren can constitute a basis which can be firm in some cases, and shaky in others:

I've been parked on the margins of society. That's something I see almost every day. Fortunately, the children come round, as do the grandchildren. It's so nice to see the curiosity and eagerness to learn of the youngest children. Looking for answers to the hundred "why's" that my great-grandchildren ask. And if I get the names mixed up, they correct me gently and cheerfully. Silly granddad.

Of course, childless people can't fall back on their children. But they can have social relationships as well:

I struck up a friendship with a girl from two doors down. She is 16 and she comes round almost every day. She certainly rings every day. I sometimes feel like a sort of very-late-adopted-child. But I can always count on her. That's a very basic feeling for me.

The loss of a partner, however long ago it may be, is an enduring feeling.

Of course, our marriage wasn't always rose petals and sunshine. But you're always stronger together than alone. That's just the way it is. When he was very ill, I could do a lot for him.

That was a sort of consolation, but not the sort of consolation I asked for. When he died, the shield protecting me from the outside world went with him. You only really understand how valuable things are when they have been lost. I miss him, above all as a companion. And that feeling of missing him stays with me, even though he used to drive me round the bend.

Some of the people we interviewed take a more active approach to their links with society and actively take on responsibilities:

It's not a question of charity but of solidarity, interest in your fellow human beings. That's a belief I share with all my brothers and sisters, past and present. That's the upbringing our father gave us. And it's become my motto, the thing I have passed on to my children. I think feeling responsible for something keeps you on your toes. And that's not something that stops when you get older.

During the course of the interviews, it emerged clearly that these links with society imply a lot of personal significance.

7.3.2 Pets

As well as people, animals also play an important role in terms of care, company and a sense of security. They are loyal companions who are always present.

I got my first cat when I was seven or eight. Since then, I've never been without a cat for more than a couple of days. They are beautiful, sociable animals. They're no trouble at all. And fortunately you don't have to take them out for walks like dogs. She has her own regular spots around the house and she's very loyal. They say that cats don't get attached to people. But nothing could be further from the truth! She's much more than just company for me. It's a close friendship. We are inseparable. That's right! I never feel alone.

Older people sometimes establish contact with other people through their pets:

I take my dog for a walk three times a day. It's wonderful. It's great to take off the leash and to watch the dog running around and playing on the field. It doesn't matter what the weather is like, I have to go. It's a pleasant sort of duty. A dog's love is unconditional, just like small children. I can't imagine my life without my dog. And it's because of the dog that I have so many social contacts. Because there are always other people letting out their dogs. And we always end up chatting. Maybe only about the weather, but it's still very pleasant.

People in nursing or care homes have enduring memories of their pets:

It really is too sad for words that people aren't allowed to have pets here. Not even a budgie. I think that is so miserable and unhappy. For me too, that's right. Surely everybody wants to look after somebody else or a nice animal? That's it: Here, they take away your chance to give love. I think that is degrading. There is no other word for it. Eyes blazing with fury as these words were spoken.

7.4 Continuity

A third strategy for a strong old age is to enrich it with memories of the past and prospects for the future.

7.4.1 *Continuity*

Age is a metamorphosis that can result in a radical transformation of a person's abilities. However, in the interviews, older people said there were other ways of maintaining valuable ways of experiencing life:

I love gardening. I could spend every day trimming, hoeing, digging, whatever. That outdoor person has been shut up inside. But I still love caring for my plants. And there are the freshly cut flowers every week, of course. They give my life colour, literally.

I've had plenty of boyfriends and lovers throughout my life. And I still don't feel like I'm out of the picture. Because there are still men who have that glint in their eyes when they look at me. Yes, I like that. But I still haven't met that one man who could be the definitive solution for my existential loneliness'. With a laugh: 'And time is starting to run short. . .

This continuity strategy can embrace different generations :

I think people are just the way they are. I mean: My father taught at a junior school and later he was a headmaster. My brother, my sister and I all went into education. All of us in our own ways, but all in the same branch. Apparently, things like that get passed on from generation to generation. I hope I've kept some of that inquisitiveness and thirst for knowledge. I keep an eye on what's going on in the world and I talk about it a lot with other people. I make up my own mind first and then I try to convince other people. It may be a bit missionary, but it's part of the essence of my character.'

Finally, the continuity strategy certainly need not imply a grim attachment to the past:

I've read a lot all my life. As a teacher at a secondary school, of course, I had to. I'm still very fond of reading. Decades ago, I promised myself that, after retiring, I would finally get round to reading all those literary masterpieces that I never read, like Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*. Well, I just haven't got round to it. . .

7.4.2 *Looking Back*

Looking back to the past is a cherished activity.

Almost everything takes me back to the past. When the children come and visit, I always end up thinking about when they were little or about their years at school. It's like a silent movie.

Remembering keeps me fit! All those good things from the past. . . They're something to hold on to, certainly.

7.4.3 *Survival*

The here and now is something else that takes on another dimension in old age. From being something self-evident, survival is transformed more and more into a competition. In those terms, life continues to be a *struggle of the fittest*:

There is a certain relief in seeing other people being affected by all sorts of major and minor infirmities that come with age. Every funeral or cremation turns into a sort of reunion. At the reception, we older people get together and draw up the balance. Paul's already gone, and I hear that Marianne and William are not doing so well. It's more common among men than women, I suspect. Life's competition is a source of satisfaction down to the grave.

7.4.4 Taking Leave and Best Wishes Looking Ahead

Memories are indispensable for personal and human identity, and a common activity. Looking ahead is much less widespread, even though it is definitely a feature. In virtually all cases, it is linked to people's own children and friends in the form of wishes for the future:

I hope my children and grandchildren are happy and stay healthy'. Concerns about 'the world at large' are felt particularly by people who keep a close eye on the news through newspapers or television: 'I just don't know where the world's headed. I worry a lot about that.

And the couple in a residential home:

Of course, we realise that this is our last stop in the journey through life. We are happy that we are still together. Not many people are this lucky. We are grateful to our creator. We have had a good life and we are ready for death. We have both made our own bereavement cards: We wrote the words and chose the pictures. And we have also worked out the details of the requiem. The music, the readings, everything. It was quite a labour of love.

But is this really looking forward? Is it not more like making preparations for saying goodbye? Only a few people start genuinely new initiatives: 'Well, why go to all the fuss?' Even though one woman was learning Russian: 'I love languages, and it's a challenge for me. You're never too old to learn, as they say. That's right!'

7.5 Conclusion

That aging just happens is not an issue. But the issue of whether to let it just happen at the cost of giving up autonomy, freedom and independence is all the more so. Because even though acceptance and resignation are not altogether strangers to older people, many of them also find antidotes to the forces that sometimes inevitably affect them. Confirmation, integration and continuity strategies allow them to re-invent themselves again and again, despite the changing terms and conditions of their lives.

Together, older people create a place for old age. Here, it is striking how often the word 'time' came up in the interviews. Often in the shape of familiar expressions like 'having all the time in the world', 'time flies', 'time heals all wounds' or 'everything in its own time'. Life—read: 'time'—needs ordering and discipline. One interviewee talked about the phenomenon of time in more depth:

When you're young, time doesn't exist; it's a tyrant during your working life and it loosens its grip as you get older. Time turns out to be very flexible and elastic, like an elastic band.

In other words: Time is what you make of it, is something I came to understand. That's a consoling thought.

In conclusion. Another remarkable fact is that the word 'destiny' wasn't used during the interviews. By contrast, the word 'consolation' came up with amazing frequency, often phrased as: 'Oh well, I may be old, but I console myself with the idea that. . .' These consoling thoughts include the openings people still have: Children and grandchildren, the presence of friends and inclusion in social networks, excursions, activities and skills. And, last but not least, memories that are often rich. One thing is certain: 'You don't grow old on your own'. For some people, this will be a consolation; for others, it won't.