

MOTIVATION FOR PURPOSEFUL LIVING IN OLDER PEOPLE *

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I HAVE been allotted 12 finite minutes to talk about the infinite subject of basic factors influencing older people to maintain and extend purposeful and useful living and interpersonal relationships after retirement. Such a subject implies advice-giving and formula-making, with all its potential errors and inconsistencies. It might even be analogous to the situation in which we encourage our children to sit up and talk, and then spend a great deal of time telling them to sit down and shut up.

My beginning point was stated most clearly by Miss Ollie Randall at the recent Arden House Conference on Protective Services to the Aged. "It is a dangerous academic exercise to attempt to describe the characteristics of the elderly in even general terms. There is already too great a tendency to endow all older people with the decrements commonly associated with the word 'old' as applied to humans. There is no escape from the fact that the major characteristic of older people is that of being extraordinarily individualistic, that each person is in himself the sum total of all his days, of what he has done with them and what they have done to him, whatever his abilities, disabilities or

inabilities have been to cope with the events of life. He is totally different from everyone of his fellows—even from members of his own family who may have been exposed to the very same influences and events. This fact alone makes the task of individualization of treatment and of creating the proper milieu for the treatment of the patient, an extremely difficult one which has serious implications for change in current methods . . ."

In the next decade, our aging population will represent the greatest number of people having the greatest measure of the greatest freedom. They will represent a great reservoir of creative potential. Insofar as this aging population remains unprepared for the free time ahead, we shall have to keep them busy, keep them distracted, keep them entertained, provide "bread and circuses," and provide work—all in order to avoid more serious maladaptations. Only preparedness can bring about a full realization of their creative capacities.

The old Talmudists would put a drop of honey on the first page of the beginning reader of the youngster, and have him lick it. This to associate sweetness and learning. To state it another way, there can be no recreation without education and preparation. You will re-

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member an oft-quoted comment of Socrates when he was told to prepare for death—"Know ye that I have been preparing for it all my life."

Basic factors in any life situation are usually associated with infancy and childhood as the cornerstones of growth and development. An immense body of knowledge and experience has been laboriously accumulated setting forth the tasks, liabilities, and assets of all age levels. With our patients and clients we seek for information as to matters of dependency, helplessness and anxiety in infancy, and possible resolutions of these conflicts, since they have to do with the development of confidence and self-sufficiency. We try to grasp a picture of the problems of submission, domination, and control the person has been exposed to in his attempts to crawl, stand, walk, manipulate and taste. We are alert to the reactions in illness, injury and separation in the whole family group. We note the transitional capacities from one phase to another—what was left unsolved, what was overlooked, what was crushed, what was left fallow. We try to trace the child's inquisitiveness, curiosity, explorations, and achievements, and what happened at times of failure, loss, and dislocations. We attempt to record the many significant people in the patient's early life that he will use forever in unconscious repetitions.

The energy involved in the transactions of the adolescent almost dwarfs the explosive thrust from the launching pad of any space missile. The struggle for emancipation and self-delineation takes place in a most complicated arena. The continuum quickly approaches new tasks—work, marriage, the creation and rearing of a family—the record grows thick even without details.

And then the middle years—of which Joyce Cary in *A House of Children* has provided this description: "The average

man or woman of 40 is like a traveler who, when he has reached the most dangerous part of his journey among deep and unknown savages, discovers all at once that his map is wrong, his compass broken, ammunition damp, his rifle crooked and his supplies running short. He must push on at high speed, blindly, or fail altogether and fail his companions." It is true that for many the middle years are a time of crises, disasters, catastrophes and impulsive change of course, but for others they are years of re-evaluation, revision, renewal of friendships, interest, confidence and self-esteem.

No one would argue that all of these phasic developments are of prime importance in considering how people function in their later lives, but as enumerated so statically, they are indeed only a half truth. The other half is the fact that the human ego functions in a marvelously expanding fashion in every age period. The capacity of the ego in the later years to learn, develop insights, change direction and shift values has been demonstrated beyond doubt. This capacity is further reinforced by medical help, psychotherapy, casework services, recreational and occupational therapies and the other developing techniques that have appeared in recent years. This fact alone, that the perceiving ego can flourish and be revitalized in the late years, interferes markedly with all the stereotypes of aging. The older person can adjust his sights, widen his horizons, and learn how to use this new block of time differently, even though historical evidence indicates regressive trends, pathological defenses, and other physical and emotional shortcomings.

To summarize, first of all there is a major need of older people, retired or not, to understand better the maturing and aging process. Being aware of changes taking place in their mental and

physical capacities, personality structure and social situations, enables them to accept relatively and adapt. Heightened self-awareness makes for easier gain of new knowledge and new skills. Many people go from a treadmill of work to a treadmill of play in retirement. The devoted housewife or spouse whose services are no longer needed in such abundance, the faithful worker who finds himself limited physically, the outdoor laborer who can no longer take the vicissitudes of the weather, all these, need to be informed that what they are experiencing may not be a personal failure, but a need to shift their abilities into other places.

Secondly, we need to make available information and help to the group approaching, and in, retirement: other opportunities for employment, healthful living practices, social contacts and knowledge of the chronic diseases. We need to know how to insure effective family and group associations and to dig out the old skills and creative talents that maybe at one time in their life brought much satisfaction to them. Often this kind of historical detail is scattered and haphazard and needs to be translated into terms that will not threaten the older person but make sense to him.

A third issue is the one that has to do with general public education about aging. The stereotypes must be attacked again and again, wherever they are

found, and mostly in the older person's concept of himself. It is the legitimate concern of the medical profession, the social service facilities, and the psychological services to provide this knowledge. There is a vast need to supply supervision and education to the personnel in all centers, so that there will accrue to the older person in all settings, a proper professional and human attitude towards the reality issues germane to this time of life.

I would like to close with some excerpts that bear repeating from Rabbi Heschel's inspiring address at the WHCA, 1961. . . ." The tragedy is that most of us are unprepared for old age. We know a great deal about what to do with things . . . even what to do with people . . . we hardly know what to do with ourselves . . . we know how to act in public . . . we do not know what to do in privacy . . . Old age involves the problem of what to do with privacy. . . . Some of the programs we devise are highly effective in helping the aged become children . . . after all, to be retired does not mean to be retarded. . . . Recreational activity sometimes aggravates rather than ameliorates the condition it is trying to deal with . . . namely, the trivialization of existence. . . . The only answer to the anguish and boredom is a sense of significant being . . . the need to be needed . . . something being asked of every person . . . Education for retirement is a life-long process. . . ."