

UWM's Center on Age & Community presents



## **The Moral Challenges of Later Life**

What are the vices, obligations, and virtues of older adults in a  
time of expanding longevity?  
In a “post-Erickson world?”

A FREE lecture/discussion with

**Thomas R. Cole**

**Thursday, September 20<sup>th</sup>  
12:00 p.m. to 1:30 p.m.  
UWM Student Union  
Room 280**

## **After the Life Cycle: The Moral Challenges of Later Life**

Lecture by Thomas Cole

Sponsored by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Center on Age and Community

September 20, 2007

Thomas R. Cole, Ph.D., is the Beth and Troy Grossman Professor and Director of the McGovern Center for Health, Humanities, and the Human Spirit at the University of Texas Health Science Center in Houston. He is also a Professor of Humanities in the Department of Religious Studies at Rice University. Dr. Cole has done influential work on the history of aging and humanistic gerontology, including looking at spirituality issues in aging. His book, "The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America" (Cambridge University Press, 1992) was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and has become foundational for the study of gerontology.

In addition to articles and books, Cole is also known for documentary film projects. His film, "Still Life: The Humanity of Anatomy" was an official selection at the Doubletake Documentary Film Festival in 2002. The film explores the unique, unstated relationship between anatomy students in cadaver labs and the people who donate their bodies to science.

Cole serves as an advisor to the United Nations NGO Committee in Aging and in the past served on the President's Council on Bioethics. UWM's Center on Age and Community was pleased to welcome Dr. Cole for his lecture, "After the Life Cycle: The Moral Challenges of Later Life."

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This lecture is a version of a talk I gave to the Presidential Council on Bioethics. This is ongoing work, representing an amalgam of cultural history, moral philosophy, and cultural criticism. I'm a historian, not a philosopher, by trade.

"I'm after normative guidance about how to live in later life. ... What are the moral and ethical challenges?"

This talk will take the following course:

- 1) Historical overview as background for the questions I pose.
- 2) Modern Life Cycle
- 3) Challenges and key questions
- 4) The moral contours of dependency

There is very little work done in the area of the moral and ethical challenges in later life. I'm interested in the reciprocal side of it. . . What should we be doing with ourselves as we get older? How we answer such questions has tremendous implications.

### **Henri Nouwen**

Henri Nouwen was a monk and theologian. He wrote the book "Aging: The Fulfillment of Life."

The central motif of his book is a large wagon wheel leaning against birch tree in white snow. This invites each of us to think of ourselves as a spoke in the wheel of life. It is an endless, circular image of the life cycle.

Medieval Christians came up with this image of the circular life cycle. Nouwen is a late 20<sup>th</sup> century thinker.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, there is a great emphasis on relief of suffering and personal dignity – the notion that living makes dying worthwhile. This era concerns itself with how to say with confidence, “I really AM.”

Nouwen’s circular life cycle views are wonderful images, but they are quite at odds with how we live our lives because our modern lives contain so much emphasis on individualism.

There are also ancient ideals of the life cycle perpetuated by the Greeks, Romans, and Hebrews. These people adopted an image of the life cycle as a natural, unified part of nature.

### **Erik Erikson**

Erik Erikson wrote “Childhood and Society.” He’s not read anymore – he’s more of a historical figure. Erikson addresses a basic conflict in later life – that of integrity versus despair.

He notes that young people need to receive a set of norms and values from older people (but we must remember it is relative, because there is a danger of arrogance).

He identified eight ages of man, and has an integrated image of the life cycle. He has an idea of natural virtues built into the stages of life.

Erikson’s view is idealized. He offers hope for ideals of the life cycle that we *want* to believe in, but my point is that we’re living *after* the life cycle.

### **The Three Boxes of Life**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, behavior becomes chronologically dictated. Box 1 is education; Box 2 is work; and Box 3 is retirement.

These roles are supported by a robust welfare state. The roles are built into the bureaucracy, but the welfare state is now beginning to crumble.

Now we see a shrinking welfare state, privatization, fewer pensions, issues with social security. More older people face uncertainty about income security.

We are in a transition to an information economy. There is an emphasis on technology and the globalized economy. Some of late modern society confirms Marx.

Society shows an ontological insecurity, asking “Who am I?” – not stating, “This is who I am.” Identity becomes problematic. Identity is undercut if it doesn’t have social and cultural support. Identity requires recognition by others (it is not just personal).

What are you supposed to do after you've raised your kids? We've lost the sense of the whole.

This lecture title parallels Alasdair MacIntyre's book from the late '70s called "After Virtue." We are living in a world where it is unclear what it means to be a virtuous person. So, in titling this lecture "After the Life Cycle," I am making an analogous claim.

MacIntyre said we must choose Aristotle's version of the virtues or surrender to complete nihilism. I reject this dichotomous choice.

That there is an absence of consensus on how to live in later life does not mean that people have no morals or virtues. The search for identity itself has moral value.

### **Charles Taylor**

Charles Taylor is a philosopher who is very concerned with the idea of *authenticity* – a buzzword of the new age. He looks at authenticity as an ideal and explores the idea that each one of us has something unique about us, so the way to live a good life – to live authentically – is to live in a way that maximizes that unique part.

There is a danger of narcissism with this, of spending our lives finding out who we are. Of going around sampling religions, drugs, etc.

But searching can also lead to moral and spiritual strength. You are to wrestle with moral norms you grew up with and make conscious decisions for yourself so to avoid degenerating into selfishness.

### **Senior Marketing**

Senior marketing emphasizes to people that the most important thing to do is to maintain your health. Senior marketing views health as an end in itself rather than as a means.

### **Questions We Should Be Asking About What Constitutes a Good Life**

To whom am I accountable?

What legacy will I pass on?

How can I prepare for my death in a way that minimizes disruption?

We tend to act as if older people are people who receive from us but are not held accountable.

Rabbi Hillel asks three basic questions. I take each question to stand for stages of the life cycle.

- 1) If I'm not for myself, who am I?
- 2) If I'm only for myself, who am I?
- 3) If not now, when?

I apply these questions to later life:

As citizens, what responsibilities do we have to the environment, children, parents, future generations, spouses, disabled spouses?

What responsibilities do we have to shoulder the burden of our own economic support?

For our own health?

With these questions, you do not get simple true/false answers. You get a variety and the need for dialogue.

### **How Complex Life Can Be**

We need to strive for wisdom. What are the paradoxes we face on the way to wisdom?

Wise people can tolerate uncertainty and they understand the need for multiple points of view. Wise people observe, and learn to accept reality as it is.

There is a tension between the contemplative life and the active. Our society emphasizes the active.

There is a paradox of physical decline and spiritual health. How do we hold on and let go at the same time?

A challenge here is the intractable American hostility toward physical decline. America has a fear of death, and that fear inhibits growth.

### **The Moral Contours of Dependency**

There are no guidelines on how to be a good dependent person (not that there should be). It is a terrible burden to be a burden on others.

Wendy Lustbader's ideas explore how "successful frailty" depends on many factors including reciprocity. Mercy in its truest form is based entirely on exchange.

We seem to lack the language for the difficulty of dependency.

Wendy Lustbader helped someone and said 'Thank you for giving me the honor of helping you.' The woman who was helped was carrying the burden of helplessness and Wendy had the opportunity of usefulness.

### **Concluding Remarks**

I feel a sense of awe and amazement made possible by the longevity we enjoy. But what's the price of that gift? Mass longevity is both a gift and a burden. We must accomplish the moral work of learning how to grow old.

### **Question and Answer**

**Q: Will we really have the public dialogue you say we need? How do we do this?**

**Cole:** We can answer that by doing it. Dialogues can happen in places like congregations and community centers. For it to work, a grassroots level beyond academics is needed. We need to accept that there will be racial, ethnic, and class differences in how people define good aging.

**Q: In your talk, you mentioned globalization, the shrinking welfare state, and lack of financial security in old age. In light of that, how can we still ask and answer the**

**more existential questions that you raised? What is the collective moral responsibility regarding responding to the shrinking welfare state and calling for policy reforms and collective action?**

Cole: During the time I was on the President's Council on Bioethics, its leader had neoconservative political views. Because of that, the council's recommendations led to personal ways of responding to the issue and more talk of privatization – not suggesting a fresh New Deal.

One option for how to respond to the policy reform needs is to change the tax structure as it relates to social security, and you can encourage people to work longer. I am not an expert on Medicare, but I believe we must put limits on what we can afford to pay for as a society. Technological advances are driving increases in health care costs. One way of answering your question is, 'Go spend some time with these people.' Understand their wisdom.

**Q: Is it a question of willingness, if we know that Scandinavian countries can provide more health care coverage, but the United States, with such a high G.D.P., refuses to spend more on health care?**

Cole: Europeans have a stronger sense of solidarity than we do in the U.S. We emphasize self-reliance and freedom. That notion is not going to go away. We need to fashion solutions in line with our culture. That's why Hillary Clinton's new health care plan is more timid, because now she knows what is politically feasible. Another policy option is means testing for social security. But that will never happen, because social security is based on the notion that it's for everyone. Means testing would bring a two-tiered way of looking at the support.

**Q: So few young people are involved with the social security debate. People don't get involved because they don't see the need right now.**

Anne Basting, Director of the Center on Age and Community: Education across the life course is important. And part of that is media literacy. People need to understand how the market forces are pushing them. We need to ask, 'Do I believe that this isn't an issue that pertains to me because it isn't being marketed to me?' [To Cole:] Where are you leaning for your next film project?

Cole: I will do a film project about minority elders living in squalor, and empathy. If I can get them talking, we'd see the moral strength and spiritual depth that many of them have. I want to explore, what can we learn from them?

About the social security topic from before, most Americans think of social security as put in, get out. But it was set up as a form of social insurance that requires an intergenerational transfer of funds. Bush does not see or agree that this is an intergenerational program.

**Q: It seems like we don't have language clarified around aging. The quote in your talk from Wendy Lustbader intrigued me – the statement of "successful frailty."**

Cole: Society thinks you are pensioner, consumer, or patient. We need new models. I don't think it's not out there. We need to find new stories of old age. If we have paradigmatic stories, we may be able to create better and different models, but we need to do the work.

**Q: How do we handle complexity and limitations in aging?**

Cole: Any set of ideals that we hold up will have strengths and weaknesses.

**Basting: There is little collaboration between the war on poverty, the strong disability movement, and aging. There is also a need in aging for more sarcastic messages to get ideas across.**

Cole: That's like the proposed promotional campaign "Houston: It's Worth It" that showed pictures of cockroaches. It was too subversive, but that's the kind of thing that changes perception.

**Q: Why do older adults need to have a unique moral responsibility, different from other age groups?**

Audience member: We have given older adults a role-less role, so this talk says that they have a purpose.

Audience member: In our society, existence isn't enough – you have to prove you're doing something.

Cole: There are images of what we're supposed to be doing now that people follow – stereotypical roles. What I'm saying is, let's construct some alternatives. Of course it's going to be an ideal that doesn't fit everyone. This is similar to views of God. The point I'm trying to make is, it's an image. And it's still limited. I rebel against it. I choose to see that this is a way of participating in my tradition even though I see that it's an image. We need images, but they are limited. If we don't define new images, then we are forced to live with the existing images that came before.

Basting: How do we come to terms with identity with regard to having hyper-individuality on the one hand and a seven generations view on the other hand (in which you don't own things and view everything as connected)? We need to come up with images and stories that link hyper-individualism with the communal.

**Q: What are your thoughts on the movement toward globalization?**

Cole: There is a literature on globalization and again and I don't follow it. The world's population is aging. Increasingly, the burdens fall on individuals and families because in many countries, there is no welfare state.

Basting: It should be more about exchange.

Cole: It should be intercultural.

**Q: What are your thoughts on the values of dependence?**

Audience member: I think it is odd to locate thoughts on dependence in old age, because there is also dependency in youth. The reality is that at this very moment I am actually highly dependent.

Cole: I think you and I are *interdependent*. It's not the same thing when you have to rely on people for mobility.

Basting: This is where the disability movement can really inform, because it sees interdependency as a life course issue and is invested in normalizing it.