8  Engagement, Disengagement, and Integration in Later Life

LINDA LOMAN: It was so nice to see them shaving together, one behind the other, in the bathroom. And going out together. You notice? The whole house smells of shaving lotion.

WILLY LOMAN: Figure it out. Work a lifetime to pay off the house. You finally own it and there's nobody to live in it.

LINDA: Well dear, life is a casting off. It's always that way. WILLY: No, no, some people—some people accomplish something.

—Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman

Willy Loman's angst as he nears the end of his working life reminds us that the issue of generativity continues to be a preoccupation on into the later years of adulthood. Nevertheless, whether generativity takes the more benign form of Linda Loman or the more pernicious form suggested here by Willy, it must submit, like everything else, to change with age. Gisela Labouvie-Vief pointed out that with advancing age, concern with executive power, competence, and even social stability often comes to be regarded as a burdensome vestige of the past, as "the result of a specific social fabric with its pressures toward restraining the process of individuation." The transition into later life, she suggested, "brings the most crucial turning point—a chance for freedom from, and transcendence of, those constraints." Disengag-
Engagement, Disengagement, and Integration

Leisure and Aging Well

What is needed to bring life successfully to completion? There are many ideas about this problem—religious, philosophical, and scientific. From an actuarial perspective, what leads to surviving the longest is the important question. But that is not enough for most people. Very few people wish to extend their lives if doing so means being in constant pain and illness. Of course, no one questions the importance of health for those who want simply to endure, and good health certainly can increase the sense of vitality that is a priority to people in later life, but more is usually sought in the interest of finishing one’s life story with a satisfying conclusion.

A comfortable standard of living is also a criterion for successful aging. Living in poverty, with basic needs unmet, is a low and unacceptable standard, while the “lifestyles of the rich and famous” represent a standard that exceeds the definition of “comfortable” for most. For those with some wealth and others, too, leisure is a primary source of pleasure as well as a context in which to demonstrate significant material success. Leisure activities signify worldly success, just as they did when Thorsten Veblen wrote his critique of the leisure class nearly one hundred years ago. As one contemporary variation has it, “the winner in life is the one who dies with the most toys.”

Though wishing for more money and dreaming of winning the lottery is common, people who live simply, with little in the way of material possessions, are usually at least as happy as those who accumulate things. Even those who are disabled or otherwise in poor health manage to have high life satisfaction in many cases. For them, as for most, it is the meaning in their lives—the meanings they derive from activities and interactions with significant others and their memories of the past—that contributes the most to their sense of well-being. The creation and re-creation of meaning is also a far more active process than that suggested in the display of possessions. Active involvement, especially with family and close friends who have been a part of one’s life, affords a repetition of patterns of self-expression that are personally significant in maintaining and concluding one’s life story. On a lake near my home, I encountered an older couple landing their boat after a successful day of bass fishing. I asked if they came to this spot often, and they said, “Not so much in the last few years, but we’ve been coming here for about thirty years together, and we always bring our grandchildren when they come to visit.”

It is clear from a variety of sources that leisure activity is related to a sense of well-being in later life. What remains to be determined is how. The answers are suggested in three theories of successful aging that are typically contrasted. Activity theory asserts that people...
would be happiest and most fulfilled in direct proportion to how much activity they are able to maintain. And indeed there is some evidence that older people who are happier are more active. But the correlations have never been large, and in some cases they are negative. Where there is a positive correlation between the amount of leisure activity and life satisfaction, health is often a confounding variable that is not taken into account. And even when it is controlled, the following question remains: Are people happy because they are active or active because they are happy? Finally, for those experiencing stress and loss, preoccupying activity is often a means of coping, as was discussed in Chapter 6. For example, research on widowhood has indicated that women who have lost their husbands feel a need to "keep busy," and they use leisure activities to that end. But when such patterns represent a degree of denial and interfere with coming to terms with loss or even with the reality of death, they may be maladaptive in the long run.

Another influential albeit largely discredited notion is the theory of disengagement, which holds that as the end of life draws near, people voluntarily disengage from others and from their former activity patterns, and society's withdrawal from them in turn leaves them in peace. But the evidence doesn't support the suggestion that people with reduced activities are happier, and the theory drew criticism because it was perceived as legitimizing a pattern of neglect of older people.

The theory that enjoys the most support is continuity theory, partly because it is most consistent with other developmental theories of well-being in old age (such as Erik Erikson's) and partly because it has the most empirical support. According to Robert Atchley, continuity is reflected in the fact that "making adaptive choices, middle-aged and older adults attempt to preserve and retain in existing psychological and social patterns by applying familiar knowledge, skills, and strategies." In continuity theory it isn't the activity per se that is important, it is what the activity and its social context mean to the individual. It stands to reason that those activities and relationships that have been cultivated and maintained over a long period of one's life are the most likely to carry a wealth of meaning and contribute the most to a sense of well-being. The research discussed in Chapter 3, which demonstrates the growing priority of familiar rather than novel activities in later life, provides additional empirical support for continuity theory.

Continuity is threatened in the face of negative life events such as the loss of a spouse or the onset of serious illness, and strong attachment to familiar patterns can make adjusting to such events particularly difficult when lifestyles are dramatically altered as a result. For example, in the case of widows, besides the loss of companionship and social support a spouse may have provided, the social world the couple created is often disrupted as well. But the activities and relationships that do endure in the face of significant life events become all the more important to a person's continuity, stability, and quality of life. A participant in a study of widows reflects on both sides of the continuity issue:

I've found that after your husband [dies], these friends, they're just ... gone! They never call, they never come around, you know . . . . I'm talking about the people that you used to . . . . go out and eat with, used to go to the lake, be there when they were there, you know. So, when you're alone, most of the things that you do will be done with your children or relatives.

So whether leisure activities are useful in the course of adjusting to changes associated with aging cannot be judged from the frequency or diversity of the activities. Activities must be considered in terms of the experience they bring, their relationship to developmental tasks of later life, social integration, and adaptation to social and physical change. Furthermore, while familiar activities and experiences may gain in importance as the primary source of continuity and meaning in later life, entertaining new leisure possibilities for growth and self-renewal remains important, though perhaps not to the same extent as in midlife. Activities that offer new directions for the development of competence and social integration, like taking painting lessons or serving with the Retired Senior Volunteer Program, for example, have been found to be particularly satisfying. And when such activities come to be regarded as personally expressive and "owned" by the individual, they serve continuity needs as well.

It bears repeating, especially with respect to later life, that we are looking at more than adjustment here. Much has been said elsewhere about how pleasurable activities can distract one from painful and worrisome thoughts; about how doing things with significant others affords the social support necessary to cope with loss; and how being able to participate in activities effectively may be a consolation and source of self-esteem in the face of diminishing capacity in other do-
mains. Such effects are significant and important to any analysis of the value and place of leisure in later life. But, as with earlier ages, leisure is also a context for continuing development in later life. Becoming more of what one can be does not end in earlier periods; it is very much involved in later life with this process of seeking and finding meaning. This point was brought home in Helen Lopata’s interviews with widows. Signs of personal transformation followed after an initial period of mourning in many cases. Many of these women seemed to find a kind of liberation in the absence of marital responsibilities (especially where the spouse was physically or psychologically abusive or overbearing). And, if financial resources were adequate, they seemed to “bloom” in personal ways. Lopata noted:

[They] reconstruct their self-concepts, finding support from new social roles and relations, rather than being tied down to people who saw them through a past prism. They report feeling whole and venture into new activities. They travel, join new groups and start new ventures.

As will continue to be demonstrated throughout this chapter, leisure is relevant to the process of growth as well as adjustment in later life.

There are few ideas about growth and adjustment in later life more compelling than Erikson’s notion of establishing ego integrity. Ego integrity is the feeling of wholeness one reaches in making sense of a life. As was noted in earlier chapters, hierarchical integration is required to reorganize oneself in response to the changes that differentiation brings about; and both of these processes continue until the end of life for most people. But emphasis in later life is on integration, with the difference being that rather than simply adjusting to recent events and changes, the entire life course is the subject of the integration process. Ego integration utilizes leisure through both engagement and disengagement, but actions taken in the context of leisure vary dramatically in their impact on ego integration and on other indicators of progressive adaptation in later life.

**Ego Integrity**

Ego integrity is the result of having established some internal organization of the self as well as some connection with the rest of the world. Erikson described ego integrity as

the acceptance of one’s one and only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions. ... The possessor of integrity is ready to defend the dignity of his own life style against all physical and economic threats. For he knows that an individual life is the accidental coincidence of one life cycle with but one segment of history. Ego integrity ... implies an emotional integration which permits participation by followership as well as acceptance of the responsibility of leadership.

Consistent with his progressive model of development, Erikson asserted that generativity is a precondition of ego integrity; a sense of being part of the world, of having contributed to it in some way, enables one to conclude a life story in a meaningful and acceptable way. Most people, regardless of their economic resources, are concerned with their “legacy.” To avoid the despair that is the antithesis of ego integrity, it is not enough to find meaning in only a personal, self-reflective process; connections to others—whether family, neighborhood, or nation—are also at issue. Although one’s personal future may be limited, a concern for leaving the world as well off as possible prompts interest in the problems that younger generations are and will be facing. Nevertheless, some amount of despair may be inevitable.

Erikson and his colleagues came to a better understanding of later life despair after interviewing a group of people between the ages of seventy and ninety. In these interviews the investigators found considerably more evidence of despair than they expected—over regrettable aspects of the past that can’t be changed, over aspects of the present that are painful, and over a future that is uncertain for one’s offspring and frightening in the prospects of inescapable death and perhaps suffering—even among otherwise enthusiastic and well-integrated individuals. Erikson and his colleagues concluded that some despair must be acknowledged and managed in a balanced way that also allows the work of integration.

Despair over the past is best dispelled through self-acceptance. One’s impact on others must come to be understood in relation to limitations as well as abilities, with a certain amount of forgiveness granted oneself for past failings or transgressions, but typically, the past is remembered selectively and what is remembered is recast in a more favorable light to allow the future to be lived continuously and positively. In any case, some amount of life review is necessary for
ego integration; avoiding coming to terms with the past makes despair more extreme.

Life review and reminiscence are necessary to do the work of accepting oneself and one's place in family and/or cultural history. Understanding and accepting oneself is an important part of the process. Reminiscence can be done alone—as in a kind of life review—or casually with others, but in either case it reinforces continuity and helps contribute to a sense of integrity. When it is done socially—whether sharing stories with grandchildren, as part of a program in a long-term care facility, or in some other context—it provides an opportunity to use feedback to validate and construct a coherent narrative. Rather than remembering one's life as just "one damned thing after another," such interchanges allow for the interpretation of all experiences, regrettable or not, as integral parts of one's life story.

Even in swapping tales while waiting for a bus or with a neighbor, the re-creation of past experience benefits ego integration. Recalling the distant past may, in fact, be easier than remembering events of a week earlier; cognitive deficits that may accompany aging are less likely to impair remote memories that are the subject of reminiscence than they are short-term memory processes. Furthermore, there is some evidence that the activity of reminiscence itself has the effect of maintaining a degree of cognitive plasticity and social connectedness. The adage "use it or lose it" applies here, even if "it" is merely the mental process of reliving the old days.

Is this preoccupation with days gone by enough, though, to capture the best that life has to offer in its later stages? One imagines a rather stodgy old man recounting past adventures and adversities in serious but pleasant conversation with a companion. If this image is unappealing, perhaps it is because it can be contrasted with culturally shaped idealizations of youthful vitality that ignore the realities of aging and dying. Clearly, the relative physical passivity of later life may belie what is an active mental process associated with both social and private reminiscence.

Nevertheless, we need only look to the aging themselves to see an endless variety of outward-bound, present-centered patterns of activity. If Erikson is right, the integration function will hold sway in the end, but to see ego integration as only a matter of reflection would be a mistake. Meaning is to be found in action as well.

**Engagement**

By engagement I mean the initiation of action to perpetuate current interests and relationships or establish new ones. It is purposeful involvement in the world, intended to re-create meaning and maintain continuity or create new possibilities for oneself and others. Continuing to serve on the board of a local hospital auxiliary is an example of continuing engagement, while taking the initiative to recruit a speaker for the association's next meeting might reflect an interest in change. Experimentalism in later life is considerably less likely among those who are frail and vulnerable, but age itself does not bring an end to the process of differentiation. Indeed, seeing oneself as a learner and as a cultivator of new experience may be an essential self-definition to be integrated into the course of a life review. Joan and Erik Erikson, with Helen Kivnik, discuss a wide variety of "vital involvements," including work-related activities (e.g., remodeling, gardening, financial manipulations), grandparenting, lifelong learning, and the arts. With respect to the arts they note that older people have more time for sensory immersion than middle-aged people typically have; and they are inclined to do their utmost to "alert and empower the aging body to remain actively involved."

Engagement is also likely to produce a variety of discrete experiences, from the intense, flowlike experience of committed, effortful application of abilities such as preparing a special dish to the more casual, open-focused attention of listening to a poetry reading. Television watching may be very stimulating and involving, but the effort required is limited and thus is unlikely to generate any sense of control or competence. Knitting an afghan, gardening, or playing the piano can bring about the same intense, flow-producing involvement that is associated with high investment activity in earlier periods.

Still another kind of engagement is that of simply tending to the "daily round" of chores. While it might seem misleading to suggest that these are leisure activities, they become enjoyable when done in a leisurely way. Watering the plants and tending to pets are often described as activities that are more a matter of leisure than work; and as routines they can be a source of continuity and stability. They provide a "rhythm of comfortable predictability." In the Erikson study referred to earlier, the experience was illustrated by the women who said, "I can't wait to get into bed at night with a good book. And I
can’t wait to get up in the morning and have a cup of coffee.”24 As with other kinds of engagement, even daily routines can be mood elevating and distracting from other sources of anxiety, stress, loneliness, and depression. Involvement that requires more intensity, however, is likely to be more useful developmentally.

The ideas of flow and high-investment leisure were discussed thoroughly in earlier chapters, but these experiences are common to later life as well. What is important to consider with respect to later life, however, is the deeper meaning in the activity. To be able to express one’s competence is clearly a source of continuing self-esteem, but the connection to ego integration may be less obvious. While involvement with novel, flow-producing activities can be differentiating and growth-producing, intense involvement in familiar activities that reinforce enduring aspects of the self are generally more appealing. Activities that have a “career” quality are an important source of what Achley refers to as inner continuity, the psychological property that people seek in later life as an underpinning to ego integrity.25 Familiar activities remain flow-producing and challenging because their inherent challenges continue to be elaborated and because a person has the ability to manipulate the activities to make them more challenging. Furthermore, the external continuity that is often provided with such activities—the same places, companions, and conditions—contributes to a sense of social integration as well. For example, an aging collector of antique lamps would not only continue to attend local auctions but might also subscribe to trade magazines that locate lamps in existence around the country and interact via the Internet with others who share the interest.

Roger Mannell identified candidates for “good” leisure in later life in his review of Jack Kelly’s work on high-investment activities, Stebbins’s work on serious leisure, and Csikszentmihalyi’s work on flow. These concepts apply similarly to activities that “have been developed over time, require a great deal of effort and resources, require the acquisition of skill, and are most likely to yield an enhanced sense of competence and worth.”26 What they lack in spontaneity and variety they make up for in commitment and intensity, while still having enough freedom and enjoyment to be regarded as leisure. Included are a wide variety of things such as gardening, tinkering around the house, and playing with grandchildren, anything in which one could become repeatedly absorbed.

Mannell and colleagues asked a sample of ninety-two retired older adults to wear pagers and keep journals in which they reported their experiences when they were (randomly) beeped.27 The researchers found higher affect and other indicators of flow when people were involved in high-investment activities; but contrary to expectations, flow seemed to be facilitated when there were some extrinsically reinforcing conditions such as those associated with a sense of obligation. They concluded that without commitment, even with freedom to choose, flow-type experience was less common. Most important, the percentage of time in flow activities significantly predicted life satisfaction for these older adults.

Some of the explanation for the unexpected finding related to motives for activity involvement in this study may lie in the characteristics of the age group studied. As we noted in Chapter 2, history must be recognized as a determinant of developmental change. Persons who grew up during the Depression of the 1930s, for example, have been shown to place less value on leisure than those of other cohorts.28 They are, as a result, more likely to demonstrate a “busy ethic” that “legitimates the leisure of retirement...defends retired people against judgments of senescence, and...gives definition to the retirement role.”29 In other words, leisure is all right for this cohort group only if it is used “productively.”

The fact that the participants in Mannell’s investigation were likely to identify instrumental payoffs when justifying their involvement in high-investment activities is due in part to the value systems of their age cohort. This age group, most of whom were children during the Depression, are especially likely to get involved in those activities that they believe have some redeeming social value and somewhat less likely to invest much time in activities for their own sake. But to say that they were extrinsically motivated is to miss the intrinsic satisfaction they apparently derived from what they were doing, whatever its extrinsic payoffs. More to the point is that the identity of this age group is tied to working hard and being productive. Indeed, this is part of the meaning for them and contributes to their sense of identity and integrity.

Perhaps subsequent cohorts are or will be less attached to the productive significance of their activities; but the value of the activities in which they engage will be no less tied to their meaning systems. As Waterman has pointed out about personal expressiveness, one’s personal characteristics and central purposes in life come together in defining the meaning of activities.30 And continuing involvement in those activities that require the special talents and interests of an indi-
individual, because they are self-defining and socially significant, are likely to bring enduring meaning in later years.

Such activity-specific benefits notwithstanding, the greatest impact of activity involvement comes in doing the activities with others. By providing the connectedness so important to ego integrity, the activity itself may be largely irrelevant at times. In fact, research on activity involvement as a contributor to well-being in later life often fails to account for the effects of social context and the associated relationships, whether they be friendships or family. Actions engaged in together can be important for the relationship, even if the activity has little personal significance: the casual structure of many leisure activities often provides the ideal context for self-disclosure, resource exchange, and displays of affection, thus solidifying the relationship. In this sense, shared involvement in any activity may contribute to feelings of connectedness and ego integrity.

The best of both worlds may come in sharing activities that are particularly meaningful to both or all participants. Shared enjoyment may contribute as much to meaningful integration in later life as it does to intimacy in earlier adulthood. While it may be true that suffering and struggling is a bonding experience, much of the pleasure of romantic love is sought and found in shared activity and especially, as was noted earlier, in shared flow. The intense enjoyment that is felt when skills and challenges are effectively matched in an activity seems to be magnified if that happens in interaction with another.

Finally, participation in organized group activities such as political action groups, service organizations, or churches is also important to the quality of later life. Certainly attachment to the community is reinforced by such activities. Volunteer work can also be a source of feelings of generativity, which in turn provide a basis for ego integration, as noted earlier. More than two-thirds of people over sixty-five belong to voluntary organizations in the United States, and nearly as many go to church once per month or more. The impact of such activities is not entirely clear; however, the accumulated evidence suggests that only church-going has a positive impact on adjustment (and church goers are not inclined to look at this activity as leisure). The impact of voluntary activities on ego integrity and other indicators of well-being remains to be fully determined. And there may even be a disadvantage to ego integrity in being overly involved in a wide variety of activities. In such cases disengagement may be the healthiest alternative. Though we previously touched on disengage-

ment theory and its association with ageist beliefs, disengagement in leisure can enable one to refocus time, energy, and physical capacities in activities that provide the greatest source of personal satisfaction.

Disengagement

In many social programs for the elderly, keeping active is almost a mantra. "Use it or lose it" applies to both mental and physical abilities. Engagement is clearly seen as the healthiest alternative in later life, even if only as a distraction in coping with necessary losses. To believe otherwise is assumed to be a sign of resignation. But social scientists have not always sung the praises of an active, outwound-bound lifestyle in later life. As noted in the discussion of theories of successful aging, there was a time when disengagement was assumed to be the healthiest posture to have in later life.

Disengagement was introduced in the last chapter to capture both role disengagement—what Levinson and his colleagues referred to as "detribalization," the relinquishing of unnecessary and unwanted social entanglements—and the action taken to create leisure more subjectively. While disengagement in the sociological sense means the relinquishing of social roles in a relatively permanent and public manner, we may also look at it psychologically as the experience of separating from some patterned involvement and relaxing. Both kinds of disengagement can have a liberating effect, even when not truly chosen, such as with retirement from oppressive working conditions or with the death of an overbearing spouse. The resulting freedom can bring about a luxurious peacefulness or serve as the basis for dynamic self-transforming engagements. But disengagement as a pattern is often alarming when it seems to be an indication of resignation from life, a prelude to dying.

As noted earlier, disengagement has a controversial intellectual past. The theory asserted that disengagement may be initiated by either the individual or society but that it will eventually be the option of choice for both and that the individual will fare better as a result. The research that followed the development of this theory did not offer a great deal of support; people continued to prefer to be actively engaged, and those who would seek to sever ties with older people as a function of age were regarded as ageist. People experience disengagement in a total sense not as a matter of preference but only as a result of disabling physical conditions or the loss of resources. Conti-
nuity theory has replaced disengagement as a better explanation for what people seek in later life.

Nevertheless, one of the more salvageable tenants of the original disengagement theory is that a "reduction in the number and variety of interactions leads to an increased freedom from the control of the norms governing everyday behavior." This "increased freedom" needs to be recognized as a positive outcome if it is the result of a person's preferences. Selective disengagement from some circumstances may actually facilitate attention to those matters that are most crucial and engagement in those activities that are most important.

Reducing peripheral social relationships can also be important to preserving emotional well-being. There is some evidence that unwanted social interaction has a more deflating effect on well-being than positive interaction has an enhancing effect. And even when interaction occurs with supportive and trusted others, there are times when it is unwelcome, especially when offers of help bring up stressful associations. Loneliness is a common problem in later life, especially for those who have no choice in the matter, but solitude is quite often a preferred condition.

Among the ninety-two retired Canadians referred to, being alone was associated with low levels of affect and arousal for those who lived by themselves, but for those living with spouses, time alone was actually associated with a more optimal level of arousal, concentration, and sense of challenge. Apparently, time alone—almost 40 percent of the free time available to the married people sampled—was used as an opportunity to engage in other things. And rather than being a reflection of antisocial patterns, the kinds of activities engaged in alone often had implications for others, such as in making things for one's children. The disengagement in this case is only a prelude to another kind of engagement.

When it is voluntary, the act of disengagement often has the effect of establishing the context of leisure, however it is subsequently used. Stepping back psychologically frames the situation as more clearly one's own, to be used for personal advantage, whatever that may be. The developmental advantage of disengagement, at least when it is a matter of choice, is that it can bring about the kind of control that is necessary for both self-assessment and self-expression. Reminiscence and life review become more likely when one is not staying busy and actively involved. Reverie for solitary reminiscence or discussion of past events with intimate friends or family members requires time and some freedom from expectations.

Disengagement serves some people better than others. To be able to be truly relaxed and peaceful may take emotional stability to begin with. In the early Kansas City studies of subjective well-being in later life, investigators identified several "types" who were most satisfied with life. These included a group who had fulfilling patterns of engaging activity but also a group who seemed able to be happy and satisfied with a limited pattern of activities and a relatively passive lifestyle. The investigators called this group the "rocking-chair" type and contrasted them with another group, the "armored-defensive," who were neurotically active and unable, apparently, to relax. While there are clearly individual differences in the patterns of activity that are most adaptive and satisfying in later life, vigorous activity is not necessarily an indicator of positive mental health; nor is the lack of overt activity an indicator of the absence of well-being.

Disengaging selectively also allows more energy for those activities that are more personally important. Selective disengagement thus enables continuity of activity and interests that are most meaningful and personally integrative. Discriminating among alternative action possibilities may mean the abandonment of some roles and relationships, but the benefit to other activities and relationships will usually justify the changes. The creation of time and the selection of more meaningful patterns and relationships are also likely to contribute to ego integration.

Integration

I told my son: triage
is the main art of aging.
At midlife, everything
sings of it. In law
or healing, learning or play,
buying or selling—above all
in remembering—the rule is
cut losses, let profits run.
Species rise and fall
by selection, which is triage;
even the beautiful,
Retirement

Even when it is voluntary, disengagement from the roles of work is difficult. The loss of status, patterned activity, and predictable association, while not generally as painful as the experience of unexpected unemployment in earlier periods of adulthood, nonetheless creates a void that requires considerable psychic attention. But the transition itself can lead to a kind of reorganization of the self and social identity, allowing competence and vitality to be reconstructed in more personal ways.

In an interview study of thirty-two recently retired men and women, Mark Luborsky found that most of the participants turned to their homes and the surrounding outdoor space in reorganizing their lives. They spoke enthusiastically about having the time to engage in special projects related to housecleaning and landscaping/gardening. The critical factor, though, was laboring alone; his respondents showed patterns of retreat from the public eye, working on the interior of the house or the backyard before moving out to the front yard and back into the community. Luborsky identified the following stages: (1) secluding the self; (2) denuding and loosening ties to the earth and the social estate; (3) recontouring space for renewed productivity; (4) redefining cultural ideals for independence; and (5) using projects as starting points to reorganize social lives. And despite retiring from white-collar as well as blue-collar jobs, nearly all sought a connection with physical labor, “getting right down to the dirt of the matter.”

Luborsky considered alternative explanations for the attraction to such activities (such as flow, taking a break, or just staying busy), but none accounted for the timing and sequencing of experiences, the emphasis in the early stages on privacy, and the focus on the physical. The projects themselves he regarded as providing “a thorough leveling of social and personal landscapes” for the purpose of reestablishing oneself, in the face of cultural messages to the contrary, as retaining the competence to be a “working adult.” In some cases the work provided autonomy, self-sufficiency, and evidence of the strength that was missing in the jobs from which they had retired. The home environment, in his view, provided new spaces and new meanings in addressing developmental tasks, particularly the generativity that is served in working on something that would endure for others to follow.
This focus on physical labor and home maintenance gave way to other interests as the retirement transition progressed for Luborsky's respondents. He interpreted the progression as a kind of recapitulation of the life span: playing in the yard to recapture childhood; "spousing" to recreate and restore intimacy to relationships; and housecleaning, which allowed life review through attention to valued objects. Most of the respondents in Luborsky's study were also involved in volunteerism and community service, and they looked on the first phases of their retirement process in retrospect as rather "selfish," perhaps not appreciating the full significance of the process.

The limited sample in this study (all Caucasian and middle to upper middle class) suggests caution in generalizing; having a house and property to attend to certainly facilitates the transformation reported here. But the point to be taken from the study is that both disengagement and engagement were implicated in the reorganization of self that occurred in this transition where the past was reconstructed in a way that facilitated personal integration.

Leisure interests and activities may be as important to personal integration in later life as they are to identity formation in earlier years. In fact, these two markers of development are affected similarly by activity. While the exploration of interests is revealing of individual potential, some continuity of interest is necessary both to solidify identity and preserve integrity. And yet it is important to recognize that growth motives last throughout life and that a departure from regular patterns of activity is not inevitably disintegrative. As noted earlier, one's identity as a learner and as a creative interpreter of life can be reconciled with declining capacities in the integration process. Strict adherence to the old and familiar is a reflection of rigidity; flexibility may be the most valuable ingredient in adjusting to later life losses. Abandoning the old and considering the new is adaptive right to the end of life.

**Conclusion**

Value judgments can be the nemesis of scientific investigation, but on the subject of aging in later life, they abound. Maybe what is wanted and needed in later life is clearer than in earlier periods. For middle- and upper-class individuals with the resources to arrange it, self-indulgence is often the simple priority, with little more than the assertion that it is their right. "I've earned it" or "I'm entitled," a person might say. A social payback is in order for having served one's country in one way or another or having successfully brought up children. And defending that prerogative may be the most compelling part of growing old for some. Integrity may be first and foremost a physical and spatial priority: protecting one's being, one's personal property, and one's niche in life. People who have suffered illness or serious insult to their bodies and find their physical integrity at risk have few resources to look for anything more. But often such people are the first to recognize that there is more to life than just feeling well and having things.

The idea of aging clearly suffers from a bad image, at least in Western culture. Perhaps, as has been argued, industrialization has stripped age of its status as a font of wisdom and tradition. Whereas we recognize the refinement that aging brings to wines, we seem far less likely to acknowledge similar patterns with human beings. Maybe this follows from our view that aging takes people, albeit against their will, "into that dark night." The inevitability of death tends to make us see aging only as decline. And if development unfolds according to some genetically coded set of instructions, the lack of control seems even more depressing.

But this chapter was not about adjusting to aging and dying. While there is compelling evidence that leisure experience is important in coping with the loss and limitation that aging brings, we have dealt here, as in earlier chapters, with its role in development, a process that can continue right to the end of life. And as in earlier periods, development in the course of aging benefits from both engagement and disengagement.

Engagement and disengagement are actions that apply to both role relationships and psychological processes. In later life, the relaxation of disengagement is important in managing the stress associated with the loss of personal and social resources but also in creating the context for life review and reminiscence that are so important to ego integration. Intense, high-investment engagement, on the other hand, may be similarly generative of a sense of integrity, albeit in a more active way. Life can continue to be vibrant as well as meaningful. Indeed, meaningful self-expression, enjoyable interaction, and peaceful repose enrich the final chapters of one's life story in ways that may be reminiscent of the best of the past.
Notes


2. G. Labouvie-Vief, "Proactive and Reactive Aspects of Constructivism: Growth and Aging in Life-Span Perspective," in R. Lerner and N. Busch-Rossnagel, eds., *Individuals as Producers of Their Own Development* (New York: Academic Press, 1981), 218. Labouvie-Vief's view suggests further that if generativity takes precedence at midlife in the Eriksonian sense, the need for disengagement and individuation identified by Levinson may only be delayed as a result.


7. Ibid.


21. Parker, "Reminiscence."


32. Ibid.

35. Ibid.


38. Ibid.
40. While Paul and Margaret Baltes (“Psychological Perspectives on Successful Aging”) don’t use the word “disengagement,” this is an essential part of the selection function of “selective optimization.”


44. See Kleiber, “Motivational Reorientation in Adulthood,” for more on this view of leisure.


46. Baltes and Baltes, “Psychological Perspectives on Successful Aging.”


49. Gender differences should be noted here. While dramatic changes in the employment status of women in the past several decades suggest that the gap is narrowing, men are still far more likely to have left jobs with the ritualized transition of retirement and with related institutionalized preparation for it. And even with comparable work lives outside the home, retirement is still less likely to provide the freedom that it does for men, since women still assume more of the domestic burden in most cases.


51. Ibid., 414.

52. Baltes and Baltes, “Psychological Perspectives on Successful Aging.”