

DONALD CAPPS

STILL GROWING



The Creative Self in Older Adulthood



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Still Growing

*The Creative Self
in Older Adulthood*

Donald Capps



The Lutterworth Press

To the Memory of Paul W. Pruyser
1916–1987

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Contents

List of Tables ix

Acknowledgments xi

Introduction xiii

PART 1 – The Transition to Older Adulthood

1. Fired Up and Loaded for Bear 3

2. A Faithful Reunion 14

PART 2 – Growth and Development in Older Adulthood

3. The Three Stages of Older Adulthood 35

4. The Aging Process as Forward Movement 64

5. The Creativity of Older Adults 87

PART 3 – The Artistry of Aging

6. Relaxed Bodies, Emancipated Minds, and Dominant Calm 115

7. Happy Spirits and Grumpy Souls 142

Epilogue: Aging Horses and Wounded Healers 169

Permissions 177

Bibliography 179

Tables

Table 3.1: Major Stages in Psychological Development 38

Table 3.2: The Decades of Life 42

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Paul W. Puyser, whom I came to know as a colleague and friend through our involvement in the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. When I was serving as the editor of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, he sent me a manuscript in October 1986, and in his accompanying note he said that he did not want any special consideration, but he observed that in light of his struggle against cancer, this might well be his “swan song” as far as his work in the psychology of religion was concerned. Sadly, he was right. He died the following April, the victim of a sudden heart attack. His article was titled “Where Do We Go From Here?”¹ I felt at the time that this title was especially fitting, for I could almost hear him asking this question of the universe at the moment of his death, and then, having asked it, adding something like, “But don’t tell me. I’ll want to see and hear it for myself.” If older adulthood begins at seventy, Paul died the very year that he entered this period of his life. But as I hope this book will show, he had already developed a profound understanding of this period in life. His

1. Pruyser, “Where Do We Go From Here?”

writings on the subject were tremendously helpful when, on the brink of older adulthood, I found myself asking the same question: where do we go from here?

Introduction

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*Grow: to increase in some specified manner; to come to be;
to develop so as to be*

Old: having lived or been in existence for a long time

*Creative: having or showing imagination; employing the
imagination and inventive powers*

*Self: the identity, character, or essential qualities of a
person*

.

THIS IS A BOOK I never thought I would write, much less discover as I was writing it that I actually enjoyed doing so. I had always thought that growing old would be a rather discouraging subject, and although I have written about discouraging subjects before, I viewed the writing of a book on these subjects as a way to formulate practical strategies for dealing with them so that they would no longer seem discouraging. In other words, these other subjects invited me to identify the grounds for hope that were already present or that might be teased out of them by studying them with more care than I would normally have done.

But the subject of growing old seemed so discouraging that I could not begin to imagine that it could lend itself to the same approach or

strategy. In fact, it even occurred to me that one of the reasons we Christians have emphasized our hope in the afterlife is that it provides an invaluable distraction from the discouraging thought of growing old. We can tell ourselves that growing old is an ordeal that we need to suffer through in order to gain entry to heaven, a land of perfect contentment and peace. While I would not wish to minimize in any way the comforting effects of this ultimate hope, it leaves us somewhat in the lurch as we contemplate the intervening years.

It was easy, of course, to tell myself that the prospect of growing old is not nearly as bad as I assumed it to be. I even told myself that there must be something wrong with me for thinking of it this way. But after giving these suggestions some thought, I came to the conclusion that they merely shifted the blame from older adulthood itself to the one who was on the verge of becoming an older adult. So I protested, “It’s not my fault. It’s the reality of the situation.” So much for the well-intentioned attempt to argue myself out of the conviction that older adulthood is an inherently discouraging affair.

So, what to do? I began rereading the writings of a couple authors—Sigmund Freud and William James—who had been of great assistance to me in the past. Specifically, I went back to Freud’s book on humor—*Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*—and revisited his idea that humor saves in the expenditure of our not-unlimited psychological resources. Specifically, it enables us to forego our normal tendency to lend ourselves to *painful emotions*, *costly inhibitions*, and *difficult thinking*.² Returning to Freud did not change my view of older adulthood as inherently discouraging, but it did open the door to a more hopeful view by suggesting that I need not waste my own not-unlimited psychological resources on the subject. It was simply not worth having painful emotions about, or trying to say nice things about, or even trying to think about it in a practical or useful way. In effect, Freud’s view of what humor does for us gave me all the incentive I needed to *quit* thinking about growing old and the fact that it was happening to me.

On the other hand, Freud’s assistance here was mainly helpful in giving me a defensible rationale for avoiding the subject of older adulthood: there are better things to think about. Yet, it wasn’t always possible to forget about the fact that I was becoming an *older* adult, especially when there were signs—physical, mental, emotional, and social—that it

2. Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 293. I present Freud’s theory in more detail in chapter 6.

was, as it were, dogging my path. So I needed something more. I found this something more in the writings of William James, especially in “The Energies of Men,” his presidential address to the American Philosophical Association given on December 28, 1906. James delivered this address when he was sixty-four years old. It was therefore written in what was for him the twilight of his life, because he was already suffering from heart failure and died four years later at the age of sixty-eight.

In this address he discussed energizing ideas.³ He noted that some ideas have an inhibiting effect while other ideas can be “energy-releasing.” Sometimes these energy-releasing ideas are so powerful that they “transfigure” a person’s life, “unlocking innumerable powers which, but for the idea, would never have come into play.”⁴

On the one hand, an energizing idea can be an idea that we have known about for a long time and perhaps even embraced at an earlier stage in life, but that we now experience as genuinely life-changing. In his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, written in 1901–1902, James had suggested that religious conversions are often the result of a idea that one has known about but that suddenly forces itself upon oneself and causes one to look at life—especially one’s own—in an entirely new way. In effect, this idea recrystallizes one’s whole system of thought.⁵ Other people, of course, may wonder why this idea has had such a monumental effect on this person. They may say, “It’s not a new idea at all,” or, “It’s hardly earthshaking.” But for this particular individual it *is* strikingly new and it *is* earthshaking.

On the other hand, an energizing idea can be a brand-new idea, the sort of idea that when *it comes* to us—which is how we think of its occurrence—we say to ourselves, “I never thought of it that way before.” In any event, this is the new idea that occurred to me: I had been using the phrase *growing old* in a very negative way because my focus was on the word *old*. But then I began to shift my attention to the word *growing*, and it suddenly occurred to me that *growing* in the context in which I was using the phrase *growing old* is a very positive word. As one of the definitions cited at the beginning of this introduction indicates, *to grow* means “to develop so as to be.” One *could* take this to mean only that one is simply developing into something old. But, if so, there is a certain

3. James, “The Energies of Men,” 1236–39.

4. *Ibid.*, 1236.

5. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 183–84.

paradox in this regard, for *old* is defined as something that has “lived or been in existence for a long time.” How can something suddenly come to be when it has been in existence for a long time?

Instead, I began to center my attention on the word *growing* and to think seriously about the fact that older adulthood is a period of growth. This became the energizing idea that fundamentally changed my way of viewing the experience of growing old. Older adulthood is often viewed as a period of decline, if not of deterioration; but there is no reason for us *not* to view it as a period of growth and development. In thinking of it this way, I recalled a passage in James’s book *Pragmatism*, published in 1907, in which he referred to “the letting loose of hope.”⁶

There are many reasons why this idea had not occurred to me before. One is that I simply assumed that older adulthood is a time of dissolution, decrepitude, and decay. To be sure, I knew older persons who appeared to be vital and even full of life, but I could not help thinking that this very vitality disguises the fact that they are in a period of their lives when the very opposite of growth is occurring. The thesaurus says that antonyms of *growing* are “lessening,” “shrinking” and “withering.”⁷ I was also mindful of the fact that we tend to praise older persons who grow old “gracefully.” The qualifying word *graceful* is rarely used in reference to the growth that children, adolescents, and younger adults experience. In fact, we tend to view the growth of adolescents as anything but graceful. Why do we use the word *graceful* in relation to older adults? This is probably because we do not think of older adulthood as a period of growth but as a period of lessening, shrinking, and withering—in other words, the very opposite of growth, and we think that some older persons accept this diminution more gracefully than others do.

The fact that older adulthood is a period of growth and development is the potentially energizing idea that informs this book. No doubt, some readers will question whether this idea can be genuinely energizing. They may think it is interesting enough but hardly the kind of idea that releases energies. They may even feel that the idea that older adulthood is a period of growth and development is an expression of desperation or even of denial, a refusal to acknowledge that the author is getting on in years. Of course, they may be right, but the very purpose of this book is to make a case for this idea and its potential for changing one’s view of older

6. James, *Pragmatism*, 49.

7. Agnes et al., eds., *Webster’s New World Roget’s A–Z Thesaurus*, 354.

adulthood from one of discouragement to hope. Moreover, this book is intended to show that this idea is fundamentally true, for the more this energizing idea took hold of me, the more aware I became that in my own life and in the lives of older persons I know, growth and development are the norm. It's just that I wasn't really noticing that this is, in fact, the case. To be sure, there is also evidence of the fact that we are experiencing growing pains, a term usually applied to young children and used, as the dictionary reminds us, rather loosely and with no precise medical meaning.⁸ But calling the experiences of older adulthood growing pains is very different from declaring that older adulthood is a period of lessening, shrinking, and withering.

Having said what this book is essentially about, I would now like to comment briefly on the way that it is structured. Part 1 focuses on the transition to older adulthood, and it is largely autobiographical. Chapter 1 relates my decision to embrace older adulthood, while chapter 2 concerns my reunion with my boyhood self and his continuing assistance in navigating this new terrain. There are, of course, many other resources that one is likely to draw upon in the transition to older adulthood, but these chapters serve as an invitation to readers to recognize that they themselves possess inner resources of which they may not be fully aware.

Part 2 is concerned to make the case that growth and development are integral to older adulthood. Building on Erik H. Erikson's life-cycle model,⁹ chapter 3 presents my proposal that older adulthood consists of at least three developmental stages, each of them about a decade in length or duration, and chapter 4 presents the view of Paul W. Pruyser that the aging process is one of forward movement.¹⁰ The fact that chapter 5, the culminating chapter in this section of the book, focuses on his article about creativity in older adulthood¹¹ is the basis for the book's subtitle—*The Creative Self in Older Adulthood*. Creativity is itself a sign of growth, and it seems to be at the center of the growth that occurs in older adulthood. Creativity, after all, requires imagination and inventiveness in light of changing circumstances, and these capacities typically derive from the playfulness, the curiosity, and the pleasure-seeking that older adults share with children.

8. Agnes et al., eds., *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 629.

9. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (1st ed.), chap. 7; Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle*, chapter 2.

10. Pruyser, "Aging."

11. Pruyser, "Creativity in Aging Persons."

To illustrate the creativity of older adults, the final chapter of part 2 focuses on artists who in their later years adapted to the physical changes typical of older adulthood, and developed new and fresh methods and approaches to the act of painting. Thus, in addition to imagination and inventiveness, creativity typically involves adaptability, a capacity that older adults are often thought to lack (e.g., note the frequent observation that older adults are “set in their ways”).

Part 3 consists of two chapters that draw on the idea that if older adults are creative, their creativity finds expression in the very artistry of aging. Chapter 6 employs two articles by William James (one of which is “The Energies of Men”) to suggest that the life of the older adult may—and often does—reflect the qualities of a relaxed body, an emancipated mind, and a spirit of dominant calm. Chapter 7 focuses on the well-attested fact that older adults tend to experience mood changes, some of which are considered by themselves and others to be rather negative. I focus especially on the view that older men become rather grumpy, and use the story of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs¹² to suggest that their happy and grumpy dispositions can live peacefully together. (Of course, whether other persons can live peacefully with these individuals is another issue, and one that is beyond the scope of this book.)

Finally, in the epilogue I consider the possibility that young-adult readers of this book may envision a vocation in which they minister to older adults. Drawing on Henri Nouwen’s pastoral image of the wounded healer,¹³ I suggest that young ministers and older adults have something in common, namely, their experience of loneliness. In effect, I propose that their ministry to older adults may be informed by the fact that when they see an older adult, they experience a moment of self-recognition despite their differences in age, physical appearance, and the like.

As I noted above, the concluding chapter in part 2 includes a brief discussion of artists who in their late adulthood produced works of art that reflected new ways of viewing, understanding, and appreciating the world. The American painter Anna Mary Robertson Moses (popularly known as Grandma Moses) especially exemplifies the creative self in older adulthood because she did not begin her painting career until the age of eighty, when arthritis in her hands forced her to give up knitting. But she also exemplifies the fact that older adulthood is a period of

12. Weyn, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

13. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*; also see Dykstra, ed., *Images of Pastoral Care*, 69–70, 76–84.

continuing growth and development, for in her midnineties her painting style began to change. As Jane Kallir writes in her biography of Grandma Moses,

In part, one may be tempted to seek an explanation for the changes in Moses' late work in her attempt to control a growing unsteadiness of hand. It is apparent, however, that the artist was quite aware of what she was doing and that it was intentional. "I'm changing my style," she said in a 1956 interview, "getting modern in my old age, with a head full of ideas." The late style was not a diminishment but a triumph of her creativity.¹⁴

Perhaps it was no accident that her last painting, which was painted the year she died (in 1961 at the age of 101) was titled *Rainbow*, thus recalling the story of Noah and the fact that the rainbow was the sign of God's covenant with every living creature who was with Noah in the ark, and with all their future generations (Gen 9:12–16). As the rainbow was for God a reminder of the covenant, may it also be a reminder to us that God is the original Creative Self.

14. Kallir, *Grandma Moses*, 148.

PART 1

The Transition to Older Adulthood

