A Conversation with George L. Maddox on Aging

From "The Human Condition"
Bert Kroeger Smith, interviewer
On Aging

“No deposit, no return.” Everyone has seen those words imprinted on bottles and other throw-away items, yet how many have stopped to think of what they reveal about our society, about how we think and feel and how we relate to the world? What might an archeologist a thousand years from now think if he came upon a refuse heap full of articles stamped “no deposit, no return”? Perhaps to him it would indicate an affluent society in which people used things carelessly, in a sense sucking the juice out of them and then throwing them away. And, if the archeologist then came upon a newspaper clipping about the way in which some people in effect are put away in warehouses, he might see an analogy between human beings and artifacts. He might, in fact, presume that people as well as cans and bottles had stamped on them, “no deposit, no return.”

But everything is not marked in that way. The archeologist, if he looked further, might uncover items admonishing, “dispose of properly.” If he pursued his search he might discover signs of a more ecologically conscious period in which containers were marked, “return for refill.”

These phrases—“no deposit, no return;” “dispose of properly;” “return for refill”—in a sense reflect philosophies of life. Which would we hope represents our outlook towards others, and how would we want others to think about us? Clearly, “return for refill” would be the preferred way.

American civilization today might be considered at the “dispose of properly” stage, but it is not yet far removed from “no deposit, no return.” People are still inclined to view others as though there were juice in them, to be extracted...
in the workplace or in the home. When the juice is gone, many become indifferent toward what remains. The elderly are objects of the greatest indifference.

There is increasing awareness that we live in an aging society, a society in which middle-aged persons are beginning to see their own future reflected in the way in which they respond to those older than they. The changing attitudes that are beginning to appear seem not so much sentimental as they do realistic. With this realism comes a need to reanalyze the entire life cycle. Childhood is not everything; adulthood is not everything. With any luck at all, people are going to reach old age. Being a part of the older generation need not be as unpleasant as it frequently is.

**Dependency**

The Center for the Study of Aging and Human Development at Duke University has made a study on the patterns of aging. Researchers have found that the greatest problem of growing old, as perceived by the elderly, is dependency. This is not simple dependency, but the kind in which one loses control. Losing touch with reality and no longer being able to control one's own life become special problems in a society that places great value on independence. It is a concern not only in old age but throughout the whole life course. Adolescents worry a great deal about gaining independence. Adults, particularly when they are ill, give thought to its importance. Older people, as their health fails or as they become confused, become aware—and those around them become aware—that dependency returns at the upper end of the cycle. It is at this time of life when a realistic view must acknowledge that problems in the long run can only increase.

Considerable fear among the elderly is focused on dementia, on the capacity to know what is real and what is not. Dementia, often referred to as hardening of the arteries, involves the loss of cognitive capacity, the capacity to think and reason and respond appropriately to those around us. This is a common experience that increases with age. By the time people are in their 80s, 20 percent will be demented according to that definition. It is important to recognize, however, that this high percentage comes relatively late; for people from 65 through the 70s, there is no more than a five percent probability of suffering from this problem.

Dementia is a frightening experience at any age. Though chances are relatively small that any particular individual will be affected by it, the outcome is devastating for those who are affected. It is the loss of the functions that we think of as distinctively human that underlies the great concern.

Old age must be returned to the life cycle; old people must be returned to the human race. Problems of aging such as dependency have their counterparts throughout life. They are the problems of human beings.

**Qualities of the Aged**

At the Center at Duke University, two major qualities of the aged have been noted. One is variability. Because people have a habit of categorizing, there is an imaginary sign on each wall
at the Center that admonishes, "Do not refer to 'the elderly.'” Persons doing research become acutely aware that there is such variability among the aged that it is nonsense to categorize them. Even worse, from a scientific point of view, is that it is wrong to do so. Variability is observed throughout the life course, and it does not disappear as people get older. Just as students in a junior high school class differ greatly in height, skills, and thoughts, so do a group of 65-year-olds. They differ not only in physical appearance, but also in what they value, how they relate to others, and what they consider important. They were not alike at the age of 13, and they will not be alike at the age of 65.

A problem common to older people is that they accept the negative attitudes about aging that surround them. As Pogo says, "We have met the enemy and he is us.” Older people tend to become their own worst enemies by accepting limitations determined by others. Late life is a season of loss, and it is realistic to acknowledge it as such. Appearances change, families grow up and leave home, friends and spouses die. However, these occurrences are not unexpected and, if faced realistically, are not unbearable for most people. Human beings in general are strong, resilient creatures who can cope with what they expect. While old age is not necessarily a pleasant time, it is on the whole a bearable one in which people can put together satisfactory lives.

Another basic characteristic of the aged learned at the Center concerns their potential for living. Despite the losses that occur, there remains in most people a tremendous reservoir of strength, not just in terms of normal courage but also in terms of vitality. Persons of all ages generally have the physical and intellectual strength to do what is required of them. Most can be heroic from time to time, study harder, exert more energy on demand, rise to the occasion in whatever way is needed. What differentiates the young from the old is not the capacity to do what is ordinarily expected, but the depth of their reserves. The aged lack reserve strength and therefore tend to guard their resources jealously. The young, perceiving reticence as inability to perform, tend in turn to overemphasize the limitations of the elderly.

As a nation, we have convinced ourselves that older people are not interested in many activities. We assume they are not concerned with learning, for example, because they are not storming the universities. Many, however, are both interested and capable, but they are saving their resources for the learning process itself rather than expending energy on the attempt to enter the learning domains. The elderly are in need of opportunities and of available resources.

*Delaying Action*

It is possible to delay the negative aspects of life through learning and working. Once people of all ages recognize that the elderly have the potential to do a number of things, they can look for occasions to encourage such action. Opportunities are beginning to appear in diverse areas. One concerns employment. Social Security, although well conceived at the outset, failed in 1935 to consider that people would live so long. As the number of workers putting money into Social Security comes closer to the number taking money out, it becomes too costly to operate.
Projected zero population growth compounds the problem; temporary problems such as unemployment also adversely affect it. Thus, in the future there will be more pressure on the aged to remain in the work force so that they will be contributors to Social Security rather than recipients. The result, however, will be increased chances for productive activity.

Opportunities also are appearing in the area of human services. Traditionally, this has been a field for volunteer work, but the direction now is toward a professional orientation. Within the action rubric are such programs as foster grandparents, in which elderly persons are paid to provide the very human service of grandparenting for children in need of loving support.

An obligation exists today, particularly for persons in their middle years, to review their lives and clarify their values. There is an obligation to look in both directions—at the younger people with whom most have some contact and at the older, for whom many have responsibilities. This review must be realistic, and being realistic does not mean that we accept the idea of being of no value, of “no deposit, no return.” Rather, it means that we recognize the real opportunities that exist, opportunities that we should insist upon if society is not already providing them. Through our attitudes and efforts, we can help society move beyond “dispose of properly” to “return for refill” as the accepted pattern of life.